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Collaboration for children: leadership in a complex space.

A voluntary sector perspective.

Carol Jacklin-Jarvis

MA, MRes, DipSw

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of The Open University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Business and Management) 2013
Abstract

The thesis explores inter-organisational collaboration across the divide between public and voluntary sectors in the context of children’s services in the UK. It explores how voluntary sector leaders ‘make things happen’ (Huxham and Vangen 2000) in this context, where the formal authority, control of resources, and decision-making appear to be in the hands of the public sector. Findings highlight the challenges of influencing dominant public sector agencies, the tensions which voluntary sector leaders experience, and the impact of the continually changing policy environment. The study emphasises the significance to these leaders of a distinct sense of voluntary sector identity, and of the contribution which voluntary organisations can make to the collaboration, and ultimately to the lives of children and families. This leads them to engage in activities which question, challenge, and disrupt their collaboration partners, whilst also engaging in more supportive and facilitative activities. The empirical research focuses on the practice of voluntary sector leaders through interviews and observations, but also presents an analysis of key government policy documents from children’s services during the period 2003-2012. This analysis reveals the ambiguity of concepts and narratives of cross-sector collaboration in these texts. Although policies and formal collaborative entities change when government changes, the ambiguity remains. Despite the challenges of this context, voluntary sector participants weave together layers of connectedness, which build collaborative capacity for future collaboration. This connectedness frequently begins with interpersonal relationships, but over time becomes embedded in the collaborative environment. The research suggests that this longer term approach to building collaborative relationships may provide a more positive perspective for voluntary sector leaders, who are frustrated by the experience of responding to public sector dominance and short-term policy initiatives.
Acknowledgements

A PhD thesis is inevitably the result of many different influences. These years of mind-bending study, and recent months of carefully crafting every sentence are the result of influences which reach back through many years of education and professional experience, and there have been many managers and teachers, formal and informal, who have guided me along the way. Most recently, my supervisors, Siv Vangen and Nik Winchester have stretched me to think and think again, until my thoughts have become distilled, and my writing precise. I am grateful for their continuing support and advice. I am grateful too to colleagues who have listened to early conference papers, and offered their thoughts and encouragement, particularly through the annual MOPAN conference and the IOR group of the British Academy of Management. Your comments made a difference to my thinking and writing, but more importantly you made me at home in the academic community. Tamim Elbasha and Anne Pike have been great PhD fellow-travellers, who have listened patiently, debated the realities of writing a thesis, and offered me their wisdom. Thank you. Thank you too to those whose voices appear in the thesis, the practitioners of collaboration, who shared their thoughts, and allowed me to listen in to their conversations. Your contributions are necessarily hidden to protect anonymity, but I hope that you hear your voices, and believe that those voices can make a difference.

Finally, a huge thank you to my family. Clive, Abi and Nathan, thank you for allowing me to take the time and space to step away from the busyness (and salary) of work to take this time to study, and to become the second ‘doctor’ in the family. I don’t promise though to stop studying just yet! Thank you too, Joyce and Ivan, Mum and Dad, for encouraging me to love books, and to believe in my ability to learn, but also to use my learning to make a difference.
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<td>Civil Society Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCS</td>
<td>Director of Children’s Services</td>
</tr>
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<td>DCSF</td>
<td>Department for Children, Schools and Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DfE</td>
<td>Department for Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DfES</td>
<td>Department for Education and Skills</td>
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<td>IOR</td>
<td>Inter-Organisational Relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA</td>
<td>Local Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LMCS</td>
<td>Local Member for Children’s Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCB</td>
<td>National Children’s Bureau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCVO</td>
<td>National Council for Voluntary Organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nef</td>
<td>New Economics Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSPCC</td>
<td>National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children</td>
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<tr>
<td>OU</td>
<td>Open University</td>
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<tr>
<td>TSRC</td>
<td>Third Sector Research Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VCO</td>
<td>Voluntary and Community Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>VCS</td>
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Prologue

‘We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.’

Martin Luther King Jr. (1963)

In spite of the extent of public provision of education, social care and health services, an estimated 3.5 million children in the UK are living in poverty, missing out on healthy food, appropriate shoes, and warm clothes (Whitham, 2012, drawing on data from the Institute of Fiscal Studies). In 2012, Save the Children, the international charity renowned for its work in developing countries, delivered basic household items, such as beds and cookers, to 3,000 low income families in the UK (Whitham, 2012). In the same year, the UK government identified 120,000 troubled families, whose complex problems cost the state an estimated £9 billion per year (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2013). More than 605,000 referrals were made to children’s social care services, and over 40,000 children were the subject of a child protection plan (Department for Education, 2013).

Independent not for profit social change organisations, including registered charities, voluntary, and community organisations, play a crucial role in drawing attention to such data, and to the stories of the lives of children and families which lie behind the figures (Whitham, 2012). They advocate on behalf of those in need, campaign for changes in public policy and practice, and deliver services to children in need and their families. Increasingly, they deliver such services under public sector contracts and commissioning arrangements (NCVO 2013).
Yet, these organisations find themselves in an increasingly complex and challenging social and political environment, faced with economic crisis, a fundamental shift in the welfare state, and the first coalition government in the UK since Churchill’s war time administration (Macmillan, 2011, National Children's Bureau, 2012). Researchers have described this as a period of ‘unsettlement’ for the sector variously described as ‘voluntary’, ‘third’, ‘charitable’ and ‘not-for-profit’ (Alcock, 2013), raising questions about the sector’s identity, purpose and resilience.

This is the context of social need and social change in which this thesis is written. Although the content is focused on organisations, their leadership, and the ways in which organisations and leaders work together across sector boundaries, the ultimate focus is the children, and our ability to ensure that every child in the UK experiences a happy and healthy childhood.

‘The ultimate test of a moral society is the kind of world that it leaves to its children.’

Deitrich Bonhoeffer (Bonhoeffer, date unknown)
Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Working across organisational boundaries is an increasingly familiar experience for managers and leaders, as they try to make things happen in a complex and interconnected world (see for example Crosby and Bryson, 2005, Williams, 2002, Williams, 2013). In the arena of social change, such collaboration frequently extends across sectoral boundaries to include both public agencies and voluntary organisations. This research explores this collaboration in the context of children’s services in England, from the perspective of voluntary sector leaders engaged in cross-sector projects, partnership boards and working groups.

The thesis originated in practice, and its aims are both to reflect on practice, and to make a contribution to collaboration theory which is useful to practitioners. It originated in my own experience, over a period of more than 20 years, of working in the voluntary sector as practitioner, manager and volunteer, and of relating to that sector in brief forays into employment in the public sector. As a manager in the voluntary sector, I sought to influence colleagues from the seemingly dominant public sector – to persuade them to pay attention to issues of concern to the voluntary sector and the communities they represented, to develop strategy which took account of these issues, and to spend their money differently. As a manager in the public sector, I commissioned voluntary sector agencies, negotiated contracts, listened, and responded to representation from their leaders. In both roles, I sat on multiple
cross-sector boards and working groups, collaborating with colleagues from both sectors on issues of policy and of practice. Following those meetings, I listened to voluntary sector participants bemoan the absence of a ‘level playing field’, and express their perception of public sector dominance, and consequently of their own disempowerment.

In this introductory chapter, I suggest how these experiences, and the context in which they took place, have informed the research topic, the methodological approach, and the research questions of this study. Following this introductory section, I briefly outline the background to the research – the political, policy, and practice context from which the study arose, and my own experience of working in that context. I then introduce the research questions, outline the aims, scope and narrative of the thesis, and consequently of each individual chapter. In the process, I introduce key issues and concepts, and define key terms.

As the chapter progresses, I draw attention to two issues, which are central to the thesis. The first issue relates to what it means to enact leadership in the context of cross sector collaboration from a voluntary sector perspective, where that collaboration appears to voluntary sector participants to be dominated by public sector agencies. The second issue is related to this apparent public sector dominance of the collaborative context, and focuses on understanding the cross-sector relationship in terms of the asymmetry of power between sectors. Cross-sector collaboration to tackle complex social issues takes place in a context which is framed by public policy, and in which the processes of collaboration are dominated by public agencies. As a consequence, the experience of voluntary sector leaders working collaboratively with public sector colleagues is all too often one of frustration and disempowerment.
The inter-related themes of leadership and power will recur throughout the thesis. I will argue that the policy-driven context of power asymmetry is central to understanding how leadership is enacted by voluntary sector participants in cross-sector collaboration, as they seek to influence public sector colleagues. However, I will also point to the centrality of interpersonal relationships across the sector boundary in enabling voluntary sector leaders to ‘lead’ by developing cross-sector conversations, which change dominant discourses and re-direct attention. Leadership in this context is practice which interprets, makes sense, directs attention, and engages others. In the course of this practice, leaders from participant voluntary sector organisations develop links between interpersonal relationships, collaboration processes, and policy, whilst retaining a distinctive sense of the difference they bring to the collaboration. This practice contributes to the creation of new collaborative spaces, and to the weaving of a local collaborative environment for future collaboration, described later in the thesis as ‘collaborative fabric’.

1.2 Background

Deeply embedded social issues have not been solved by the welfare state, and successive governments have recognised that, in order to address these so-called ‘wicked’ problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973), they need to draw on all the resources and expertise of public, private and voluntary sector organisations. Developing an inter-organisational cross-sector collaborative approach is offered by researchers as a potential way forward for the identification of social needs, and to service planning, development and delivery to meet those

From its inception in 1997, the UK Labour government introduced multiple collaborative partnerships to address complex social challenges (Lewis, 2005). It committed children’s services to inter-agency collaboration as a mechanism both to address the needs of the nation’s children and to deliver ‘seamless’ services. The development of the ‘Every Child Matters’ brand, and associated targets and outcomes, drew on an understanding that all sectors, agencies and professions shared responsibility for the well-being of the nation’s children (Department for Education and Skills, 2003, Department for Education and Skills, 2004). Shortly before the May 2010 general election, which was to bring Labour’s period of power to an end, government enshrined this responsibility in law, introducing legislation (Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009) to give responsibility for the planning of local children’s services to inter-agency collaborative Children’s Trusts, rather than local authorities who had traditionally held this responsibility.

The Coalition government elected in 2010 immediately withdrew Children’s Trust Board guidance, and returned this responsibility to local authorities. Yet, despite a change of political leadership, policy and legislation, and the dismantling of some collaborative structures, cross sector collaboration continues, through partnership boards, working groups, shared project development and delivery. Government policy, public sector cuts, and a continued media focus on the horror stories of abused children and the ‘failings’ of public services all contribute to continuing calls for all sectors to work more closely together (see for example the Telegraph’s criticism of social workers following the death of Baby P (Emmett, 2010), or the
Observer’s recent report on the failure of authorities to stop the trafficking of children (Helm and Townsend, 2013)). In addition, a political focus on Big Society rather than the big state, and continued emphasis on the role of local authorities as commissioners of services rather than providers, suggests that cross-sector working will continue to be key to children’s services development and delivery far into the future (Alcock, 2010a, Evans, 2011).

The period of 1997-2013 has been one of major change for voluntary organisations, including those delivering services and advocating for children and families. The growth in collaborative ‘partnership’ structures during the period of the Labour government was matched by a growth in financial relationships between voluntary organisations and public agencies (Clifford et al., 2010): commissioning processes took on an increasingly collaborative form, with specialists from both sectors working together to identify needs, plan future provision, and design services. Government formalised this ‘partnership’ approach through its Compact with the voluntary sector and the institution of the Office of the Third Sector (Zimmeck, 2010).

However, the consequences of the economic recession which began in 2007, together with public sector cuts introduced by the Coalition government, means that voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) are reporting reduced public sector grants, lost contracts, and consequently the reduction of service provision, on an almost daily basis at the time of writing (2013), as evidenced in the practitioner journals ‘Children and Young People Now’ and ‘Third Sector’. Chapter 3 of this thesis provides a more detailed study of the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector during this period, but here I note the significance of the increasing financial dependence of the sector on public funding, and the potential impact of that dependence on the future development of VCOs and consequently of service provision (Clifford et al., 2010). This changing financial relationship, set against a policy discourse of
partnership and collaboration, has led to fundamental questions about the sector’s identity and distinctiveness.

This study aims to uncover the experience of voluntary sector leaders as they participate in a range of collaborative partnerships within children’s services in this quickly changing and uncertain environment. As indicated above, my interest in cross-sector collaboration, and in the individuals who engage in collaboration across sectors, stems from my own work experience. During the period of the Labour government, I worked in both public and voluntary sectors in strategy and service development roles, managing the complexities of cross-sector relationships in a context where public policy, organizational interests and principles of collaboration and co-operation sit in tension. I understood that policy required this cooperative approach to working across sectors – this message was reinforced by regular workshops, national conferences and regional support groups facilitated by government. I also believed that this approach made sense in terms of drawing on the best people, resources, and expertise from all sectors in the cause of supporting children and families. Along with many colleagues, I believed that middle managers had a tremendous opportunity to change the future for the children of the UK, focusing not on child protection and ‘rescue’ services, but on a preventative, early intervention approach to ensure every child had the opportunity to achieve their potential. Together, we worked increasingly across organisational boundaries, participating in numerous partnership meetings, reaching across sector boundaries to ensure high quality sustainable services delivered for children on the basis of need. This collaborative approach led to increased consultation and participation, whilst fulfilling government requirements to ensure successful policy implementation, achieve targets and increase service
delivery contracts. However, experience alerted me to a number of issues which are significant to this thesis:

- Firstly, although there were frequent attempts to rationalise collaborative groups and boards, relating them, for example, to an overarching Children’s Trust at the level of each local authority area, my experience of collaboration was frequently of disjunction and confusion. The purposes of different groups appeared to overlap, and it was difficult to determine where responsibility for decision-making lay. One group questioned or even contradicted another, and I would frequently return to my own organisation (whether public or voluntary sector) for direction.

- Secondly, I observed voluntary sector leaders participating in collaborative groups, apparently raising no issues of concern, and only later expressing their considerable frustration with public sector dominance of the structures and processes of collaboration. Public sector agencies appeared to remain ‘in charge’, and were held accountable by government for delivery of rapidly changing policy and associated targets and outcomes.

- Thirdly, leaders from all sectors had considerable difficulty keeping up with the plethora of policy and programmes relevant to the development and delivery of children’s services. The period of the Labour government has been described as one of ‘hyperactive mainstreaming’ (Alcock and Kendall, 2011), in which new ideas and projects were quickly incubated and rolled out across the country. I experienced this as both exhilarating and disempowering, as I moved between a central position in one
... was fully implemented.

This disconnect between enthusiasm for collaboration and experience is recognized in a key report from the Audit Commission in 2008, which noted that voluntary sector organisations found it difficult to access the systems and resources of ‘integrated working’; decision-making processes and lines of accountability of new Children’s Trusts were often unclear; and there was little evidence that these new collaborative arrangements had yet achieved any significant impact on outcomes for children (Audit Commission, 2008). How then are we to understand continued engagement in cross-sector partnerships, working groups and projects? Specifically, why and how do leaders from voluntary organisations continue to engage in such collaborative arrangements in the context of apparent public sector dominance, and lack of access to resources and decision-making? These questions which derived from my own working experience, supported by initial reading, provided the motivation behind this research.

1.3 Aims and objectives and research question

This research project has grown then directly out of my own experience in this changing and challenging context, and consequent interest in collaboration from the perspective of leaders from the voluntary sector. In the thesis, I examine how voluntary sector collaboration participants practice leadership in this complex environment. My aim is to uncover and reflect on their enactment of leadership in the collaborative context, within children’s services, and consequently to contribute to collaboration theory. The objectives of the study are:
- To explore what voluntary sector leaders do to contribute to leadership in and of cross-sector collaboration in the children’s services context, whilst still continuing to lead their own organisations.
- To examine whether, and how, they contribute to ‘making things happen’ in cross-sector collaboration in the complex environment of children’s services.
- To explore how they make sense of their experiences of collaboration.
- To explore the impact of policy on this experience.
- To explore the implications of the findings of this project for practice.

I therefore frame the research question and follow-up question as follows:

**How do voluntary sector leaders practice (enact and make sense of) their leadership role in the context of cross-sector children’s services collaborative partnerships?**

**What is the impact of that context on their practice of leadership?**

The primary question aims to explore the experience of those who are recognised as leaders in their voluntary sector organisations, but who hold no formal position of authority within the cross-sector collaborations such as Children’s Trust arrangements.

The follow-up question focuses on the environment in which cross-sector collaboration is enacted in children’s services, the national policy context, and the outworking of policy at the locality level. This question draws on my understanding that person and context are
interdependent, and therefore that it is essential to study both together. Indeed, the analysis of multiple contexts is key to leadership across organisational boundaries (Crosby, 2010). This approach draws attention to the impact on voluntary sector leadership practice of a context in which voluntary organisations are increasingly dependent on public funding (Clifford et al., 2010), and appear to be increasingly incorporated into government’s agenda (Prochaska, 2006), whilst continuing to assert their distinctiveness.

As the research progressed, four key concepts have provided a focus for this exploration of the relationship between practice and context. These concepts both describe key features of the context in which practice takes place, and relate to key areas of practice which are enabled and constrained by that context. These four concepts are – policy and policy implementation; the processes of collaboration; interpersonal relationships; and the identity and distinctiveness of voluntary sector collaboration participants. Government policy both constrains and enables cross-sector collaboration. It promotes, and at times requires public agencies to establish collaborative entities (partnerships and working groups). However, the processes for managing this collaboration remain firmly within the control of those public agencies. In this context, backstage, interpersonal relationships across the sector boundary become a key arena for voluntary sector leaders to influence their public sector colleagues. However, to make things happen over the longer term, these relationships must also link back into collaborative processes, and the implementation of policy. At the same time, if they are to avoid incorporation of their organisation into the public sector agenda, voluntary sector leaders need to stay rooted in a sense of the distinctive identity which they bring to the collaboration table. The thesis returns repeatedly to these four concepts – policy, processes, relationships and participant identity – and to the relationship between them.
1.4 Key terms

This introduction has highlighted some of the key terms of the study – collaboration, leadership, voluntary sector. As the thesis progresses, it will become clear that authors frequently use these terms with different meanings, or use different terms to describe something similar. Indeed, the concepts behind these terms are each highly contested and the matter of some debate within the literature. In the literature review which follows this chapter, I will draw out some of the different uses of these terms. However, when not focusing on the work of other authors, or quoting the words of practitioners, I will use the following working definitions:

**Collaboration:** This term is used to refer to purposive work which extends across organisational and sector boundaries. This inter-organisational collaboration will frequently be enacted through the interactions of individuals (Huxham and Vangen, 2005).

Inter-organisational collaboration is here assumed to be more than a contractual relationship, but may include a contract for service delivery, in the context of a collaborative approach to commissioning. It may also include both formal and informal partnership boards, working groups, shared project development and delivery, and a shared approach to strategy and planning.
Leadership: The work of individuals to ‘make things happen’, re-direct attention, and change priorities.

The management literature is divided on whether management and leadership are two distinct concepts. In this study, I will not seek to distinguish between management and leadership, but rather accept that both terms are used to describe the work of addressing complex public issues through the work of individuals across organisational and sectoral boundaries. My interest is in those who ‘lead’ on behalf of their own agencies, and consequently seek to ‘make things happen’ in the collaborative context (Huxham and Vangen 2000), to influence, move forward the agenda, and ensure that the collaboration’s priorities reflect their organisation’s mission and purpose. Those individuals who are recognised as ‘leaders’ in the voluntary or public sectors will not always have the job title ‘manager’ – they may be trustees, volunteers or employees with a range of different job titles.

Voluntary Sector: the not-for-profit, non-governmental sector.

In chapter 3, I discuss the difficulty of defining this sector, the different terms used in policy, reflecting the social and political context, but also broadening and narrowing the definition, and consequently the scope of the sector. I use the term ‘voluntary sector’ to include registered charities, as well as less formal community groups. This study does not focus on the distinct but related form of social enterprises. However, participants will be involved in a range of projects and organisations, including small community groups, as well as registered charities, and some of these will also host or incubate social enterprise projects.

Table 1: Key terms
A list of acronyms is provided at Appendix 1, and in addition, the meaning of other contested concepts in relation to this study is discussed at various points in the text.

1.5 Chapter summary

Below, I summarise the content of each chapter of the thesis, following this introductory chapter.

The literature review in Chapter 2 focuses attention on inter-organisational and cross-sector collaboration for the purpose of addressing complex social problems. The chapter begins with an exploration of the presentation in the literature of the potential of such collaboration and evidence as to the difficulty of achieving this potential. In order to answer the research question and as a result of early data analysis, I focus on two aspects of inter-organisational collaboration – leadership and power. A brief review of the mainstream leadership literature highlights theories which may be particularly applicable to non-hierarchical collaborative contexts. The review then returns to the literature of inter-organisational relations (IOR) to explore how that literature suggests that leadership is enacted in inter-organisational contexts. This highlights the distinction between the leadership of partnership managers and leadership enacted by collaboration participants. It also highlights the relationship between leadership and issues of power.
The chapter moves on to review the presentation of concepts of power in the inter-organisational context. This is a much smaller literature than that which focuses on leadership in the inter-organisational domain, but suggests that the operation of power in these contexts can be understood in different ways, which extend beyond the overt formal authority of dominant public agencies.

Given the centrality of context to this study, Chapter 3 provides a detailed discussion of the context of collaboration across public and voluntary sectors. It focuses on the development of cross-sector ‘partnership’ by the UK’s New Labour government at the end of the 20th century, evidenced in government’s Compact with the voluntary sector, the development of a collaborative approach to commissioning, and the growth of boards and working groups, including Children’s Trusts. These developments are traced forward through the early years of the current (2010-13) Coalition government, but also placed in the context of the history of the relationship between the state and voluntary sector in the development and delivery of children’s services. This discussion places the New Labour ‘partnership’ concept in the context of the inter-related development of the two sectors over the past 200 years. Services for children and families which were developed in the emerging voluntary sector in the 19th century moved into the public sector as the welfare state developed. In the context of changing views about the size and responsibilities of the state, some of these services are moving back into the voluntary sector, delivered under contract to the public sector. Throughout this period, the voluntary sector has continually identified gaps in public provision, advocated for disadvantaged groups and communities, and provided services to meet perceived needs.
This review suggests that current debates about the nature and role of the voluntary sector, and associated issues re cross-sector collaboration, are not new, but rather part of an ongoing narrative, in which the voluntary sector responds to the shape, policy and provision of the state at any given time, but also challenges and changes the state and the practices of public agencies.

Chapter 4 outlines the research methodology, introducing the research approach, which I compare to ethnography, before moving on to describe in detail the data sources, methods of data collection and processes of analysis. This account of the different elements of the research indicates how they each contribute to the exploration of individual practice and context, and the aim to produce ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973). It also outlines the intent to build theory from this situated account, which contributes to extant collaboration theory, and is useful to practitioners.

Chapter 5 focuses attention on government policy, as a key element of the context in which collaboration for social purposes is enacted. It introduces findings from analysis of key policy documents from children’s services, uncovering their presentation of cross-sector collaboration, with particular reference to the voluntary sector. This analysis reveals considerable ambiguity in the policy narrative of public sector collaboration with voluntary organisations. The voluntary sector is presented in the policy narrative as deliverer of public services, and should be consulted by public agencies, but there is little evidence here of a policy driven shift in the balance of power between sectors. However, the ambiguity and fluidity of the policy narrative suggest that this does not provide an immoveable framework for practice.
Chapter 6 reports findings from analysis of interview and observation data. The first section of the chapter identifies themes in the data, while the second approaches interview data through participants’ use of metaphor. These findings draw attention to four key dimensions in collaborative practice – the individual, interpersonal, intra-sector and cross-sector. They highlight the significance of the interplay of formal and informal elements of collaboration, and of discursive strategies to make things happen in the collaborative context. Participants’ use of metaphor provides insight into the challenges of leadership in this context for voluntary sector participants.

Chapter 7 links the findings of the research, reported in chapters 5 and 6, with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, and the understanding of the voluntary sector and its context which emerges from Chapter 3. This draws attention to the practice of voluntary sector leaders within the wider collaborative environment, rather than within specific collaborative entities. It points to the significance of interpersonal relationships and discursive practices in building capacity for collaboration. Rather than affirming the emphasis in the literature on a ‘power balance’ as a requirement for collaboration, I argue here that collaborators across the voluntary/public sector divide must work with a power tension, which is inherent in collaboration. In the context of the asymmetric power relationship between sector actors, the discussion suggests that cross-sector collaboration might be understood as a context in which many lead, but in which they do so from different authority positions. Key concepts (‘collaborative spaces’, ‘collaborative disruption’, and ‘collaborative fabric’) are related back to the collaboration literature.
Chapter 8 pauses the main narrative of the thesis, in order to explore the significance of reflexivity to this study, reflecting on my impact on the process and findings of the research, and the impact of that research on me. This reflection expands on the relationship between my work experiences and the topic of the thesis.

In the final chapter of the thesis, I highlight the contribution made by this research, note its limitations, and identify areas for further research.

The thesis ends by returning to the needs of children and families which drive the need for inter-organisational collaboration which draws on the skills, knowledge and experience of all to make a difference to their life experience.

1.6 Conclusion

This thesis is not offered as a definitive response to the challenges of collaboration from a voluntary sector perspective, nor does it provide a ‘good practice’ guide. Instead, it uncovers the ambiguities and complexities of collaborative practice, and provides insight into a voluntary sector perspective on that practice. In the literature review which follows, I begin that process by exploring the literature of inter-organisational collaboration for insight into the leadership enacted by participants in collaborative contexts.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this literature review, I explore theories and models of inter-organisational collaboration, focusing on collaboration across the boundaries of public and voluntary sectors for the purposes of addressing complex social issues. The literature highlights both the potential of such collaboration, and also evidence of its complexity, ambiguity, and difficulty (Gray, 2011, Huxham and Vangen, 2000a), and frequent lack of impact on the issues it seeks to address (Connelly, 2007, Dickinson and Glasby, 2010).

Directed by the focus of the research question on the enactment of leadership by voluntary sector collaboration participants, the review briefly reviews mainstream leadership theories which focus on leadership in non-hierarchical contexts. It then turns to the inter-organisational relations literature to review research which describes the roles and activities in which leaders engage in collaborative contexts. This highlights the distinction between studies which focus on the leadership of the collaboration (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b, Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010, Saz-Carranza and Ospina, 2011, Vangen and Huxham, 2003a), and those which focus on leadership in collaborative contexts, and consequently on the perspectives of leaders from their location within collaborating organisations (see for example Alexander et al., 2001, Purdue, 2005). Researchers frequently focus on the interconnected world as it is encountered by public sector managers (Agranoff, 2006, Agranoff and McGuire, 2001, Walker
et al., 2007, Williams, 2013), but also draw attention to the enactment of leadership by participants who represent less overtly powerful partner organisations (Ospina and Foldy, 2010, Purdue, 2005).

The review which follows draws attention to the relationship between the enactment of leadership and the nature of the inter-organisational relationship – specifically to issues of power which lie behind these relationships, and the consequent impact on practice. Researchers frequently suggest that leaders of collaborations should actively seek to share or balance power between participants (Crosby and Bryson, 2005, Gray, 1985, Gray, 1989, Hardy and Phillips, 1998a). This assumes that leaders have the ability to impact on power relationships in this way. However, collaborations tackling social issues may be mandated by government, prescribed by policy, and controlled by political processes and discourses (Skelcher et al., 2005, Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002), and as a consequence appear beyond the control of the individuals who make them work in practice (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). In addition, public sector hierarchies may overlay the network relationships of collaborative contexts (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001). Thus, in spite of the emphasis on the joint and shared, such collaborations are frequently characterised by power asymmetry, and conflict between partners (Agranoff, 2006). This characterisation raises issues for the independence of VCOs\(^1\) immersed in a web of collaborative relationships with the dominant public sector (Clifford et al., 2010, Crouch, 2011, Gazley and Brudney, 2007), and consequently for the practice of leadership in the inter-organisational domain.

\(^1\) Voluntary and Community Organisations.
The collaboration literature suggests then that there is a relationship between the enactment of leadership and issues of power. The literature which directly addresses power in the inter-organisational domain is a small one, but draws attention to sources and levels of power which lie beyond formal authority (Gray, 1985, Gray and Hay, 1986, Hardy and Phillips, 1998b, Hardy et al., 2003, Huxham and Beech, 2008, Huxham and Vangen, 2005, Phillips et al., 2000). This highlights opportunities for leaders without formal authority to influence which issues are addressed through collaboration and which become ‘non-issues’ (Crosby and Bryson, 2005).

Before proceeding to discuss these inter-related issues of power and leadership in detail, I will first consider the potential and the challenges for inter-organisational collaboration for the purposes of addressing complex public issues referred to in the literature as ‘wicked issues’ (Rittel and Webber, 1973) or ‘messes’ (Ackoff, 1974). This initial discussion provides the background for understanding the experiences and practices of collaboration participants. Although this chapter draws primarily on the literature of inter-organisational collaboration, I will also relate the discussion to evidence from the voluntary sector studies literature, highlighting issues relevant to the focus of the research question on that sector. In the context chapter which follows (Chapter 3), there is a more detailed discussion of the nature of the voluntary sector, its purpose and identity, and historical relationship with the state.

2.2 The case for collaboration

This section of the review draws attention to the drivers for and potential outcomes of inter-organisational collaboration which reaches across the public / voluntary sector divide to tackle
so-called ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel and Webber, 1973). Single sector solutions have failed to resolve complex social problems (Crosby and Bryson, 2005), such as child poverty, and the impact of the ageing population. These problems lie in inter-organisational domains, beyond the reach of any single organisation (Trist, 1983). They impact on actors across organisational and sector divides and require the resources and expertise of all of these to develop new perspectives, creative strategies, and alternative service models (Crosby and Bryson, 2005, Gray, 1985, Osborne et al., 2008). Furthermore, structured inter-organisational processes force actors from different organisational perspectives to find a shared language with which to analyse and interpret community problems and the actions to address them, developing ‘mutually acceptable stories’ (Page, 2003, p.334).

Inter-organisational collaboration which reaches across sectors increases the potential for knowledge creation and innovation to address these complex social problems (Kelly, 2007, Osborne et al., 2008). Some researchers suggest that the outcomes of such collaboration move beyond the sharing or pooling of ideas and resources, and the transfer of knowledge across organisational boundaries, to the generation of new ideas and ‘synergistic’ solutions (Hardy et al., 2003, Osborne et al., 2008, Pestoff and Brandsen, 2010). ‘Collaborative advantage’ is achieved, when organisations together achieve something they could not achieve alone (Huxham and Vangen, 2005, Vangen and Huxham, 2010), both at the level of the collaboration and of the organisation. One consequence of the successful achievement of such solutions may be that collaborating organisations increase their influence with each other (Hardy et al., 2003).
In the face of complex multi-faceted social and public issues, it is argued then that ‘the case for collaborative working is compelling’ (Williams, 2010, p.3). Strategic and operational resources, human, financial, and ideas, are brought together from different agencies and sectors, and coordinated, and knowledge is enhanced (Agranoff, 2006), with both long and short term impact on programmes and participants. Consequently, many continue to argue in favour of inter-organisational collaborative arrangements. For example, researchers exploring the move towards networked rather than hierarchical forms in the UK’s National Health Service suggest that policy should continue to promote this ‘nascent solution’ to complex policy problems (Ferlie et al., 2011), in spite of its limited success to date. Similarly, the importance of inter-organisational collaboration at times of national and international emergencies is repeatedly re-stated in the literature, despite criticism of recent attempts at inter-agency working in these contexts (Tsasis, 2009, Waugh and Streib, 2006).

However, the growth in cross-sector collaboration in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has also been driven by economic, social and political factors (Newman, 2001). Changing views about the role of government and public agencies, associated with Third Way politics (Giddens, 1998), and the ‘hollowing out’ of the state (Agranoff and McGuire, 1998, Milward and Provan, 2000, Newman, 2001), have led to the increasing marketisation of public services. UK government policy has increasingly framed the state and constituent public agencies as commissioners of public services, rather than agents of service delivery, leading to an increase in contractual relationships with organisations in both voluntary and private sectors (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002), and a new mix in the provision of public services (Baines et al., 2011, Hogg and Baines, 2011). The consequent proliferation of providers of social care and welfare services has highlighted the need to co-ordinate delivery across organisational and sector
boundaries, reducing duplication and inefficiencies (see for example Easen et al., 2000, Gannon-Leary et al., 2006). These developments have in turn focused attention on the financial aspects of cross-sector collaboration, leading to ongoing debates about value for money, efficiency, and the real costs of voluntary sector service delivery, which in the UK have been further emphasised by the ongoing (in 2013) context of cuts to public sector expenditure (Lowndes and Squire, 2012, Macmillan, 2011, National Children's Bureau, 2012). This perspective on collaboration contrasts with the view that collaborative networks are a distinct alternative to the market (Powell, 1990).

Third Way politics also posited a new relationship between the state and the community (Giddens, 1998), evidenced in an increased emphasis on community engagement through this period, frequently enacted through VCOs (Kelly, 2007). In turn, VCOs sought to contribute to the development of policy in this environment of increased consultation and participation (Bryce, 2005, Craig et al., 2004). As a result of these different drivers towards collaboration, leaders from across sectors became participants in multiple inter-organisational arrangements, ‘each with its distinctive assumptions about the nature of power and authority and about the relationship between government and governed’ (Newman, 2005, p.719).

In summary, cross-sector collaboration to tackle social issues is associated with a specific understanding of the role of the state (Newman, 2001), efficient use of public resources, and the relationship between the state and community, but also with an expectation that the sum of collaboration is greater than its parts (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Some researchers contextualise discussion of such collaboration with descriptions of an increasingly interconnected world (Crosby, 2010, Crosby and Bryson, 2005), associated with assumptions of
mutuality and interdependence, which highlight that which is shared by the collaborating participants:

‘...collaboration is often seen as a means of reducing uncertainty, acquiring resources, and solving problems; and it is often assumed that stakeholders collaborate voluntarily, sharing common goals and equal power.’ (Hardy and Phillips, 1998b, p.217)

These assumptions lie behind models of co-production and co-management, which elaborate how voluntary and public sectors might work cooperatively, with each other and with local communities, to design and deliver public services (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006, Brandsen and van Hout, 2006). In these models, voluntary sector organisations work both with and for public agencies to ensure high quality accessible public services. The engagement of the voluntary sector across the public / voluntary sector divide reaches from the strategic level through service design to the delivery of services, which are ‘joined-up’ in their delivery and experienced as ‘seamless’ by communities and services users, who are in turn supported by voluntary and community organisations to engage in the planning and strategy processes (Kelly, 2007). This approach to collaboration also draws on concepts of community engagement and participation (Putnam, 2000, Putnam and Feldstein, 2003).

It is clear then that there are good reasons for organisations to engage in cross-sector collaboration, if shared solutions to complex problems are developed as a consequence. However, research suggests that this potential is rarely fully achieved (Bryson et al., 2006, Dickinson and Glasby, 2010, Powell and Dowling, 2006), the processes of collaboration consume high levels of resources, participants frequently lose their initial energy and become
discouraged, and, as a result, collaborative partnerships enter a state of ‘collaborative inertia’ (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). In addition, the cooperative approach described in the models of co-production and co-management rest on an assumption that the interests and aims of the collaborating parties coincide, but in practice the interests of individual organisations are frequently in tension with those of the collaboration (Osborn and Marion, 2009). The goals of collaborating organisations, individuals, and the collaboration itself are each distinct, and frequently conflict (Vangen and Huxham, 2012). Furthermore, the context of each instance of collaboration plays a crucial part in the processes and outcomes, as discussed further below.

This suggests that while the potential of cross-sector collaboration is great, there are also considerable challenges for those engaged in collaboration across sector boundaries on behalf of their respective organisations. Whilst the literature acknowledges these challenges, there is frequently an optimistic view of the likely outcomes if individuals draw on a wide range of capabilities, which include personal commitment to a social cause perceived to be ‘for the common good’ (Crosby and Bryson, 2005).

2.3 Challenges of cross-sector collaboration

The challenges for collaboration are then both specific and general: they relate not only to particular collaborative contexts and the issues which face participants from different sectors, but also to a wider understanding of inter-organisational relationships which reaches beyond specific contexts. Achieving the potential for inter-organisational collaboration, appears to be
both complex and arduous, and the state of ‘collaborative inertia’ is all too common (Huxham and Vangen, 2005).

Researchers argue (Bryson et al., 2006, Herranz Jr., 2008) that the IOR literature has often failed to address the differences between, and distinct challenges facing, participants from different sectors. The impact of sectoral dynamics on the power dimension of the relationship between actors is rarely directly acknowledged, although it is recognised that some participants will benefit more than others (McGuire, 2006). Beyond the IOR literature, researchers question the impact of the growth of cross-sector collaboration on voluntary sector identity and independence (see for example Alcock, 2010b, Hogg and Baines, 2011, Lewis, 2005, Macmillan, 2011). The voluntary sector literature highlights the sector’s increasing dependence on the state for its funding (Clifford et al., 2010), and consequent blurring of sectoral distinctiveness, with a growth in hybrid organisations, which appear to take on the attributes of more than one sector (Billis, 2010). In addition, it is suggested that tension is an inevitable feature of the relationship between public agencies and voluntary organisations which remain faithful to sector identity (Najam, 2000).

This brief analysis of the possible implications of cross-sector collaboration raises questions as to whether such relationships look different from the voluntary sector perspective, and if so in what ways – questions which are explored further throughout this thesis. The point here is to begin to suggest that the challenges experienced by public sector managers are not necessarily identical to those experienced by actors from other sectors in the collaborative context.
At the practice level, it has frequently proved difficult to provide services which are joined-up across organisations and sectors, and perceived as seamless by users (Connelly, 2007, Dickinson and Glasby, 2010, Milbourne et al., 2003). The large bureaucracies common to the public sector do not facilitate this coordinated approach, and the task of coordination itself uses considerable resources, which smaller organisations have difficulty releasing. In a case study of a Local Children’s Safeguarding Board (LSCB), Dudau (2009) suggests that leadership is inhibited by obstacles related to the rigidity of public sector accountability systems, as well as to the reluctance of public sector leaders to engage with the cause and take responsibilities. In addition, cultural differences and practices (Vangen and Winchester, 2013), including the language of different professions and specialisms (Axelsson and Axelsson, 2009, Easen et al., 2000), can hinder communication and the development of shared understanding of problems and solutions. Differences in size, culture, objectives, systems, interdependencies, identity, and expectations, are all sources of potential conflict (Gazley and Brudney, 2007, Lundin, 2007, Vangen and Huxham, 2012, Vangen and Winchester, 2013), and ‘subtle differences in long-term goals, belief systems...resources and organizational cultures and norms’ (Connelly et al., 2008, p.20) threaten to pull partners apart.

The very word ‘partnership’, which is frequently used at the practice level, raises expectations of consensus and levels of cooperation, which may be unreasonable and unachievable (Dickinson and Glasby, 2010). Some researchers take a cynical view of the nature of the behaviours likely to arise in these contexts:

‘In such a world, public life must consist largely of haggling, compromise, and opportunism, which in turn foster public skepticism about collaborative governance
and render it risky and challenging for public leaders and participants alike. Those who espouse collaboration may do so only for instrumental reasons, to cloak the guileful pursuit of their own interests in the language of public deliberation and stake-holder accountability.’ (Page, 2010, p.247)

Less cynically, the concept of ‘collaborative inertia’ captures the all too common experience of participants as they encounter the frustrations and slow progress of collaborative endeavours (Huxham and Vangen, 2005).

In highlighting the difficulty of achieving collaboration across the public / voluntary sector divide, and the potentially negative impact of that collaboration on the voluntary sector, the intention here is to begin to suggest the significance of these issues for participants from both sectors. At the same time, it is notable that the literature asserts that differences between organisations, which have here been listed as sources of potential conflict and difficulties, are also essential to the progress of inter-organisational collaboration. Differentiation between partners ensures that each complements, rather than competes with the other (Tsasis, 2009); different cultures are a resource, as well as a source of challenge (Vangen and Winchester, 2013); participants develop shared stories through the expression of their different perspectives (Page, 2003); and collaborative advantage is achieved when organisations each bring their distinctive contribution to the whole (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). This is the ‘fundamental paradox at the heart of collaboration’:

‘The possibility for collaborative advantage rests in most cases on drawing synergy from the differences between organizations’ (ibid p.82).
Ospina and Saz Carranza (2010) express this as the paradoxical need for both unity and diversity in the collaborative context. This highlights a tension between the essential focus on what the collaborating organisations have in common, and consequently the need for integration, and the equally essential focus on the distinctive contribution of each organisation, and therefore the need for differentiation. As discussed further below, this tension must be actively managed by those who seek to influence and set the direction of the ongoing collaboration.

Thus, we find in the IOR literature the presentation of collaboration not simply as a difficult place in which to act, but rather as an inherently paradoxical phenomenon (Clarke-Hill et al., 2003, Das and Teng, 2000, Huxham and Beech, 2003, Huxham and Vangen, 2005, Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010, Provan and Kenis, 2008, Vlaar et al., 2007). The implications of this paradoxical context for practitioners are explored further in the discussion of leadership which follows below.

2.4 Leadership

2.4.1 Introduction

This section of the literature review focuses on the individual’s role and activities in the collaborative context in terms of the concept of leadership. This discussion reflects the focus of the research question on the practice of those who lead. It also reflects assertions in the
literature that leadership is a key factor for success in the complex context of cross-sector collaboration (Cairns et al., 2011, Crosby and Bryson, 2005, Dudau, 2009). The review begins with an account of mainstream leadership theories, highlighting those which focus on the practice of leadership in contexts which are collaborative or non-hierarchical, but not necessarily inter-organisational. This is followed by a review of the presentation of leadership in the IOR or collaboration literature. This explores evidence in the literature as to whether leadership in the context of inter-organisational collaboration is distinct from leadership of single organisations, and suggests that research is unclear as to the answer to this question. Although leadership is an increasing focus of recent IOR literature, some authors suggest that theory is still underdeveloped (Connelly, 2007, Sullivan et al., 2012, Sydow et al., 2011). In addition, findings are difficult to synthesise, and differences between the contexts of specific collaborations make it difficult to transfer conclusions from empirical research to other contexts (Armistead et al., 2007, Muller-Seitz, 2012). This latter point reinforces the significance of context which is highlighted throughout this review.

The review goes on to highlight evidence from research as to what leaders do in collaborative contexts (see section 2.4.4) – what are their roles and activities? This is followed by a focus on a small number of empirical papers which specifically address the roles and activities of leaders from social change voluntary and community organisations (2.4.5), in order to determine whether it is possible to distinguish between leadership activities from different sectoral perspectives. I then go on to explore leadership in collaborative contexts and tensions (2.4.6).
2.4.2 Mainstream leadership theory

There is a multiplicity of theoretical approaches to leadership, causing Grint (2005a) to describe the concept itself as ‘essentially contested’. Scholars suggest that we know less as more is written on the topic: leadership is ‘all things to all people’ (Bresnen, 1995), a ‘perniciously vague concept’ (Spicker, 2012), which ‘disappears’ in the process of definition (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). As a result, some leadership theorists have suggested that we abandon the concept altogether (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003, Heifetz, 1994), yet it remains the subject not only of an extensive academic literature, but also of ‘how to’ books, TV programmes, and websites\(^2\). This perpetuates what has been described as the ‘romance of leadership’ (Meindl et al., 1985), with both popular and academic books frequently presenting the topic in the form of narratives of successful individuals, and perpetuating a myth of the unique or heroic individual.

The brief review which follows is not an attempt to do justice to the breadth or diversity of the literature. Instead, the aim is to highlight theories which provide insight into the focus of the research on the practice of leadership in contexts of inter-organisational collaboration focused on ‘wicked’ (Rittel and Webber, 1973) social problems. The focus of this review then is not primarily on what leadership ‘is’, in an essentialist sense, but rather on how theorists write about leadership, the conceptualisation of leadership as process or practice (rather than person or position), and the relationship between the practice of leadership and context. It begins by identifying key concepts which underlie many definitions of leadership, and then goes on to explore key issues which arise from these concepts for the current research.

\(^2\) In his 2011 review of distributed leadership theory, Bolden (2011 p.254) describes a Google search for literature on leadership which resulted in 201 million web pages and nearly six million books.
Following this review of mainstream leadership theories, the thesis turns to the treatment of leadership within the literature of inter-organizational collaboration.

2.4.2.1 Defining leadership

In the context of the range and diversity of the leadership literature, some writers question whether a definition of leadership is either possible or useful (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003). Others suggest that leadership is known when it is seen (Pye, 2005), or, perhaps, like gravity, recognised through its impact (Drath et al., 2008). Yet, in spite of continuing debates, and the theoretical diversity of the field, some have argued that key underlying concepts remain surprisingly stable and unquestioned (Drath et al., 2008). The discussion below introduces definitions which highlight these recurring concepts in the literature. It goes on to identify contemporary theories through which academics question both those underlying concepts and the idea of achieving a single definition. Instead, these theorists draw attention to leadership as a social practice.

Overviews of the literature categorise leadership theory in different ways (see for example Grint, 2005a, Northouse, 2004), but can be summarised as focusing on the person, his (rarely her) traits and abilities; the behaviour, or style of the leader; the processes through which leadership happens; and the outcomes of those processes in terms of goal achievement. In spite of the apparent diversity of these perspectives, Drath et al (2008) identify a ‘tripod’ of concepts which they argue are virtually unquestioned in the literature – the concepts of leader, follower(s), and shared goals. In addition, two further concepts recur in much of the literature
leadership as process, and leadership as influence. A relatively recent overview of leadership theory offers students a definition which captures these underlying concepts: leadership is ‘a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal’ (Northouse, 2004, p.3). This echoes Stogdill’s earlier and often quoted definition:

‘Leadership may be considered as the process (act) of influencing the activities of an organized group in its efforts toward goal setting and goal achievement.’ (Stogdill 1950 p.3)

This earlier definition draws attention away from the leader as an individual, who somehow owns leadership, instead emphasising the process of leadership. It still, though, suggests a unidirectional process of influence. This has been challenged by theorists who argue that leadership should be understood not as the influence of individuals on a group, but rather in terms of interactions between individuals. Leadership is mediated, enabled, or resisted by those described as followers (see Uhl-Bien et al., 2014, for a review of ‘followership’ theory). Rather than being passive recipients, followers may or may not respond to the influence of those they recognise as leaders; they may acquiesce or challenge, support or question, enable or constrain. This understanding of the interdependency of leader and follower draws attention to the significance of relationship (Uhl-Bien, 2006) in any understanding of leadership, as well as to the social process(es) by which leaders impact and influence followers, and followers, in turn, impact on leaders and their achievements (see for example Northouse’s discussion of leader-member exchange theory (Northouse 2007 p. 147ff)). It also suggests that the distinction between those who lead and those who follow is not always a useful one.
Five key concepts can then be identified in many definitions of leadership – leader(s), followers, process, influence, and goals (or more broadly outcomes). These concepts have appeared, with varying emphasis, in different theoretical approaches throughout the history of leadership theory, since the time of Plato (see Grint, 2011, for an historical account of leadership theory). Most pervasive is the concept of the leader. Modern leadership theory is generally thought of as beginning with a focus on the leader himself (rarely herself), his attributes or traits, a theoretical approach attributed to Carlyle’s nineteenth century account of the ‘great man’ (ibid). Although this account of leadership as residing in a person with a particular personality or set of skills has frequently been rejected, a focus on the person as leader returned in mid twentieth century theory in accounts which drew attention to the qualities and behaviour of the ‘transformational leader’ (Burns, 1978). The transformational leader is a particularly charismatic and able individual, who delivers success, turns around failing companies, or brings about social change (see different accounts of this concept and its impact in Hunt, 1999, Newman, 2005, Peters and Waterman, 1982, Storey, 2004).

Accounts of transformational leadership draw attention to the person, but also to the results of leadership in the achievement of social and organisational change. Leaders who achieve such results may be those with or without the hierarchical position which confers formal authority. Rather than drawing on position or role, they manage meaning, define what is important, and develop consensus (Parry and Bryman, 2006, Smircich and Morgan, 1982). However, while the theory suggests that such individuals are not necessarily those with position, influential books like that of Peters and Waterman (1982) focus attention on narratives of chief execs and senior managers, reinforcing a view that person and role are interconnected, leading some to conclude that so-called ‘New Leadership’ theory concentrates
excessively on top leaders and formal processes, giving little attention to leaders at lower levels of organisations, or to informal leadership processes (Parry and Bryman, 2006).

As identified in these examples, the five key concepts, and the relationship between them, recur throughout different leadership theories, but are given somewhat different emphasis. They provide academics and practitioners with routes into the conversation about how leadership happens, rather than leading towards any single definition. Highlighting the pervasiveness of these five concepts in the literature also raises questions as to their relevance to different contexts. In the context of the focus of this research on inter-organisational contexts, questions arise about the relevance of theory based on an assumption of the existence of leaders and followers in contexts where there is no clear leader/follower dichotomy reinforced by hierarchical arrangements, and where the inter-organisational literature suggests that the goals of collaboration participants are frequently unaligned (Vangen and Huxham, 2012).

Twenty first century leadership theorists have sought to develop leadership theory which is applicable to the contemporary context of matrix teams, flatter hierarchical structures, and collaborative working within and across organisations (Bolden, 2011, Gronn, 2002, Pearce and Conger, 2003, Spillane et al., 2004). This has led to theories of leadership in which scholars eschew the assumption of an asymmetric process of influence between leaders and followers, including theories of distributed, dispersed, and shared leadership which are discussed in greater detail below. In contexts where the distinction between leader and follower is unclear, or where leadership is shared, whether officially or in practice, the processes of influence become multi-directional, so that leadership is understood as,
‘a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both. This influence process often involves peer, or lateral, influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence’ (Pearce and Conger, 2003)

Indeed, if there is no clear dichotomy between leaders and followers in flatter hierarchical structures, and if we reject too the assumption that goals in such contexts are necessarily and clearly shared, then leadership can be equated with any process of influence – a definition which Alvesson and Sveningsson describe as ‘senseless’ (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003, p.363).

It is in the context of this debate, that scholars have suggested that we abandon the attempt to define leadership, and instead focus on understanding leadership as an interpretive, discursive, and symbolic device, which is socially constructed (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003, Fairhurst and Grant, 2010, Grint, 2005b). Social constructionist leadership theorists direct the researcher’s attention away from who the leader is, his or her skills and attributes, and instead towards the social practices and discourses through which individuals and groups constitute leadership in specific contexts. They ask why leadership has been written about in different ways at different points in history; how leadership is constructed by its context; what work is done by different discourses; and why attention returns so often to narratives of apparently heroic individuals (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010, Grint, 2005b, Grint, 2011). They draw attention to the perpetuation of the discourse of ‘winners’ (Grint 2011 p.13), with complex organisational events popularly attributed to leadership (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003),
telling an ‘enduring romance’ (Jackson, 2005), which maintains the myth of the heroic leader (Meindl et al., 1985). At the same time, it is argued that the way we talk about leadership at any given time, both popularly and in theoretical terms, reflects the contemporary cultural, social and political context (Grint, 2011). This focus on discourse has led to research which draws attention to how people talk about, interpret, and enact leadership, both in society and specifically in research contexts (see for example Bresnen, 1995), asking what it is that leaders do, which they conceptualise as leadership (see for example Denis et al., 2010).

This is not to suggest that the definitions quoted at the top of this section are entirely rejected by social constructionist theorists. Indeed, in a conclusion which bears remarkable similarity to Northouse’s definition, Alvesson and Sveningsson conclude their discussion of the ‘disappearing’ concept of leadership by stating that it is ‘something to do with asymmetrical relationships, influencing processes, and where people in some kind of formal dependency relationship are targeted’ (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003, p.365). However, the social constructionist critique of leadership theory does suggest how research might proceed which, rather than measuring and defining, focuses on the ‘doing’ of leadership (Denis et al., 2010) through discourse and through practice.

Three key questions arise from this discussion of the definition of ‘leadership’ for the current research. Firstly, as leadership definitions return repeatedly to processes which are enacted between leader(s) and followers, how do individuals ‘do’ leadership where there is no leader/follower dichotomy? Secondly, what is the relationship between the collaboration context and leadership practice, including discourse (language and ideas)? Thirdly, if it is unreasonable to expect that the goals of collaboration participants will necessarily be aligned,
as suggested in the collaboration literature (see for example Agranoff and McGuire, 2001, Ansell and Gash, 2008, Vangen and Huxham, 2012), what kind of outcomes of leadership is it reasonable to look for in collaborative contexts? Below, I discuss a series of theories relevant to contexts where asymmetrical relationships are less evident, hierarchical structures are flatter, and dependency less clear. The review then moves on to highlight theories which explore the relationship between leadership and context, and leadership and outcomes.

2.4.2.2 Leadership beyond hierarchy

This section provides an overview of dispersed, distributed, or shared leadership theories (Gronn, 2000, Gronn, 2002, Gronn, 2008, Pearce and Conger, 2003, Spillane et al., 2004), which have been developed to address contexts where the traditional asymmetric relationship between leader and follower is replaced by more collaborative working arrangements, including project groups, matrix arrangements, and cross-functional teams. This draws attention to the power relationship between actors in such contexts, where leadership of the team or project is not confined to those with formal authority or hierarchical position, but rather shared (Pearce and Conger, 2003). This is followed by a discussion of adaptive leadership theory which also offers an understanding of leadership enacted without authority (Heifetz, 1994).

While some scholars distinguish between shared, distributed and dispersed leadership theory (Bolden, 2011), in all of these approaches, theorists seek to respond to increasingly non-hierarchical structures in organisations and society, and to the increasing dependence of organisations on knowledge and knowledge exchange. These theories also provide a response
and counter-balance to the tendency of leadership theory to focus on the single charismatic leader (Parry and Bryman, 2006), instead highlighting the dynamic processes of influence between individuals (Pearce and Conger, 2003). Distributed leadership theorists provide a model which highlights collective social process, the relational, and the situated (Bolden, 2011, p.251), shifting the researcher’s attention from the single individual leader, and towards distributed patterns of interactions between individuals (Gronn, 2002). Viewing the object of research through the lens of distributed or shared leadership theory draws attention to issues of power, to reciprocity, and to the relationship between leadership practice and organisational (and social) structures. It eschews the concept of ‘followership’, in favour of reciprocity, so that ‘organization becomes a process of negotiation between leaders’ (Miller 1998 p.18 cited in Gronn 2002 p.427).

The discourse of ‘shared’ or ‘dispersed’ leadership appears then to imply a shift in the power relationship between organisational actors, but Bolden (2011) highlights studies (eg.Spillane and Diamond, 2007, Woods and Gronn, 2009) which suggest it is wise not to make assumptions about this shift of power. This in turn draws attention to the relationship between two key issues which recur in contemporary leadership theory – power and discourse. Above, I have suggested that leadership theory and discourse responds to and describes changing power relationships in society and the flattening of hierarchies, but the discourse of leadership also shapes expectations of leadership and of leaders (Fairhurst and Grant 2010).

Although it has been suggested that there is perhaps surprisingly little discussion of power in the distributed leadership literature (Bolden, 2011), theories of shared, distributed, and dispersed leadership highlight the relationship between organisational actors with and without
hierarchical position, and the processes of influence which extend in different directions between those actors. This focus on leadership beyond conventional hierarchies and positional power is also central to Heifetz’s theory of adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994). In this model, influence, formal power, authority, and position are all ‘instruments’ of leadership, while skills and attributes are ‘personal resources’, on which the adaptive leader may draw (ibid p.26). Indeed, Heifetz is one of those who argue for the abandonment of the value-loaded term ‘leadership’, in order to ‘describe the dynamics of prominence, power, influence and historical causation’ (ibid p.19).

Describing leadership as ‘mobilizing people to tackle tough problems’ (ibid p.15), Heifetz argues that this can be achieved by those without authority in terms of a formal recognised leadership position. Indeed the authority of high office may constrain the exercise of leadership which requires people to face up to social problems which may challenge their personal interests. In contrast, leaders ‘without authority’ present the possibility of an alternative viewpoint, ‘push us to clarify our values, face hard realities and seize new possibilities’ (ibid p.184). The experience of leading is frequently one of engaging people, directing attention, interpreting, experimenting, and learning, and of taking responsibility beyond the bounds of one’s own perception of authority, and other people’s expectations.

Heifetz’s theory of adaptive leadership shares with distributed leadership theory an attempt to locate leadership beyond conventional hierarchies and positional power. These theories move beyond the assumption of a leader/follower dichotomy to provide accounts of leadership in contexts where horizontal relationships overlay hierarchies, stakeholder interests compete, and social problems are understood to lie beyond the authority of single organisations, or the
power of the state. They provide frameworks for exploring how leaders, with and without authority, are unable to tackle such complex problems alone, but rather do so in a complex system of multiple interactions with multiple actors and contexts.

2.4.2.3 Leadership, context and practice

The above discussion also points towards a recurring debate in leadership theory which is focused on the relationship between context and practice. This debate explores how context impacts on practice, but also whether there are appropriate leadership styles for different contexts – or for different types of problems. Theorists have argued that leadership is ‘situated’ (Spillane 2006), ‘contextualised’ (Osborn et al., 2002), and ‘contingent’ (Fiedler, 1967), whilst in response, others (see for example Grint 2005) have argued that context is socially constituted, and that leadership contributes to the construction of context. In a study of transformational (or ‘New’) leadership, Bryman et al (1996) argue that even while such leaders attempt to provide a vision which changes the context, they are at the same time constrained by that context. This debate points to the potential for learning from research which foregrounds the organisational context of leadership; highlights how context impacts on leadership practice; explores the interaction between different elements of context; and the dynamic relationship between context and leadership (Porter and Mc Laughlin, 2006). More fundamentally this draws attention to the significance of the classic social science agency/structure debate to leadership theory, and consequently to the significance of theorists’ underlying ontology.
The contingency approach to leadership theory (Fiedler, 1967), which is based on an assumption that there is a ‘best’ leadership style for different contexts, has been largely rejected by scholars (see Parry and Bryman, 2006, for an account of the limitations of contingency leadership theory). However, theorists who conceptualise leadership as social practice continue to highlight the significance of context (Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2003, Denis et al., 2010). Practice theory points to the significance not only of the macro social context, but also of micro activities embedded within specific contexts. Leadership research should capture ‘the experience of doing leadership as a practical activity in complex organizations’ (Denis et al., 2010, p.67), as exemplified in the ‘messy’ context of 21st century healthcare – including ambiguity of authority structures, overlapping interests, and competing values. The doing of leadership as daily social practice has been conceptualised as ‘situated sensemaking in action’ (Pye, 2005, p.33).

Theorists drawing on a social constructionist ontology draw attention to the continued reconstruction of the practice of leadership, not in response to a context which is fixed, but in a continually dynamic interaction between agents constituted as leaders and followers and the changing context, which is constituted both by others and by those agents (Grint, 2005b). This in turn draws attention to the sense which leaders make in and of specific contexts (Pye, 2005, Weick et al., 2005). It also suggests that the way in which both leadership and context (in terms of social problems) are conceptualised, in theory, in society, and in practice, leads to very different ideas about what leaders do – and should do. Grint (Grint, 2005b, Grint, 2010) expands on Rittel and Weber’s (1973) distinction between ‘tame’ and ‘wicked’ problems to argue that while tame problems require management, and critical problems require command, it is so-called ‘wicked’ problems that require leadership. Drawing on systems theory, Heifetz
(Heifetz, 1994) also links leadership to these complex, apparently unsolvable social issues, which he describes as ‘adaptive problems’. Leadership in the context of these problems must attend to the interests of multiple stakeholders (ibid), but also to political context, and consequently to the context of continual contestation (Hartley and Benington, 2011).

The leadership/context debate is a significant one for research in the context of inter-organisational collaboration to address complex social problems. It raises questions as to whether there are leadership styles which are ‘best’ in collaborative contexts; whether there is a single model of leadership which is most appropriate for understanding leadership in these contexts; and how such contexts impact on the practice of leadership. This suggests that the researcher might usefully highlight both the day to day context of practice, but also wider contextual factors such as politics and policy, the form of the collaboration, the organisational context(s), and the nature of the problems which collaboration seeks to address.

2.4.2.4 Leadership and outcomes

In a further search for leadership theory which is appropriate to contemporary collaborative contexts, Drath et al (2008) propose an approach which focuses on outcomes, rather than on the ‘tripod’ of leaders, followers, and goals, which, they argue, leads to research which highlights ‘the practice of leaders and followers interacting around their shared goals’ (p.635). Drawing on Bennis 2007, Drath et al (2008) attribute the leadership tripod and consequent research focus to an ontology which they argue underlies most leadership theory, and which is built on an assumption that the entities of leader(s), followers, and common goal are essential to leadership. As has been argued above, these are entities which are not necessarily
recognisable in collaborative contexts. Drath et al’s (2008) alternative focus on the outcomes of leadership is therefore attractive to the collaboration researcher.

This is not to propose a performance management approach which assesses leadership by its results, as associated with New Public Management (Grint, 2005a). Instead, Drath et al propose a fundamental (they argue an ‘ontological’) alternative approach to leadership which focuses on leadership outcomes, and specifically on the achievement of direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC). Leadership happens when direction, alignment, and commitment (DAC) are all present, and the social practices which produce DAC are based on the beliefs of individuals who work together about how to produce DAC. Thus, although the focus of Drath et al’s (2008) theory is on leadership outcomes, they return the leadership debate to issues of practice, focused on the processes through which people work together to create, use, and renew the DAC outcomes.

This approach has some similarities to the work of IOR leadership scholars who highlight the achievement of integration, and the practices which deliver integration (see for example Crosby and Bryson 2010). This focuses the researcher’s attention on practices which make things happen across disparate partners, re-direct the attention of those partners, and engage them in joint action.

2.4.2.5 Interim conclusions

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3 The literature of ‘integrative leadership’ is discussed in section 2.4.3.3 below.
This review of leadership theory highlights approaches which reflect, and seek to address, the twenty first century context of flatter, but more complex, organisational and social structures, and of seemingly intractable ‘wicked’ social problems. This appears to affirm Grint’s (2011) assertion that the way we talk and write about leadership theory reflects the contemporary social and cultural context. These theories highlight the processes and practice of leadership, rather than formal position or personal attributes. They suggest that research might focus on what those who lead actually do; how they are impacted by and what impact they have on their context; how they talk about the leadership they enact; and the sense they make of that enactment. The theories examined in this review therefore point the researcher in key directions which are relevant for this research:

1. Towards leadership as processes through which influence is extended in different directions between individuals, with and without formal authority.

2. Towards leadership which interprets, makes sense, directs attention, and engages, rather than providing solutions.

3. Towards the practices through which individuals contribute to the framing of complex social problems, and responses to those problems, and mobilise others to tackle these problems.

4. Towards the relationship between context and agency as mutually interacting factors in the enactment of leadership, so that leaders respond to context, but contribute to the framing of that context.

5. Towards practices, processes, and meaning-making at the micro level of day to day practice, and away from the concept of the unique heroic individual.
However, the literature also highlights the potential dangers of a focus on continual processes of interpretation and meaning making, and drawing others into those processes, without a corresponding focus both on outcomes and on values (Avolio et al., 2009). Without the latter, the danger is that leadership makes sense of social problems in a way which ultimately endangers individuals and society. While this danger may be mitigated when leadership is understood to reside in many rather than in few key individuals, questions about values, remain central to thinking about leadership, and to the discourse of leadership, both at the academic level (ibid), and as it is played out in the media. This is an ongoing issue when thinking about the kinds of outcomes we want leadership to achieve, and the kind of social world we expect leadership to deliver.

2.4.3 Leadership in the context of inter-organisational collaboration

2.4.3.1 What is leadership in the inter-organisational context?

The topic of leadership in inter-organisational contexts has generated a relatively small literature within the context of collaboration theory. However, this literature is still diverse in its theoretical underpinning and practical application. It is important here then to consider how collaboration researchers define the term ‘leadership’, who leads in the collaborative context, and for what purpose. The discussion which follows suggests that it may be useful to note that while some researchers focus on leadership of a collaboration (sometimes described as a whole network approach), others focus on leadership enacted in the collaborative context by representatives of participating organisations.
Research suggests that participants have some difficulty identifying what makes good leadership in the context of inter-organisational collaboration, and determining whether this is different from leadership of single organisations (Armistead et al., 2007, Sullivan et al., 2012, Sydow et al., 2011). While one recent paper (Sullivan et al., 2012) asserts that research participants maintain that collaborative contexts require a distinct kind of leadership, another concludes that it is difficult to maintain such a distinction from the evidence of the collaborative leadership literature (Connelly, 2007). This debate may reflect the diversity of mainstream leadership theories (see for example the breadth of theories described by Grint, 2005a), and lack of consensus within the field.

Several authors highlight the relational aspect of leadership in the inter-organisational domain (Crosby and Bryson, 2005, Ospina and Foldy, 2010, Sullivan et al., 2012), reflecting the relational leadership literature (see for example Uhl-Bien, 2006). Thus, the development of trust between participants is identified as a key factor in the progress of collaboration (Lundin, 2007, Vangen and Huxham, 2003b, Zhang and Huxham, 2009). However, this emphasis on the relational is paralleled by an emphasis on the significance of structure.

While the significance of structural context is widely accepted in collaboration research, reflecting theories of contextual leadership (Osborn et al., 2002, Osborn and Marion, 2009), authors differ in the emphasis they place on the significance of collaboration structures for the enactment of leadership. This debate reflects the classic agency / structure debate in the social sciences (O'Donnell, 2010). Huxham and Vangen (2000) describe structures, processes and participants as three ‘leadership media’ through which leadership is enacted, shaping and
moving forward collaborative agendas. The activities of individuals build on or work with the limitations and possibilities provided by structures and processes which are often beyond the control of those within the collaboration – framed, for example, by legislation, government policy, or the authority of state agencies. Within these parameters, leadership is not limited to those with formal roles, but can be enacted by any individual who can impact on the collaborative agenda.

Drawing on Giddens’ theory of structuration, which identifies structure as both the medium and the outcome of human agency (Giddens, 1984), Crosby and Bryson (2005, 2010a) agree that leadership happens through structures, processes and people, but place a greater emphasis on the significance of individuals as agents who impact, as well as being impacted by, structures (Crosby and Bryson, 2010a). Consequently, they adopt a more optimistic view of leaders’ ability to shape inter-organisational structures in which dialogue and decision-making take place (Bryson et al., 2006, Crosby and Bryson, 2005, Crosby and Bryson, 2010a). Sullivan, Williams and Jeffares (2012) highlight the significance of leaders’ understanding and experience of structures in shaping their expectations of leadership in the collaborative context.

Sydow et al (2011) draw together the significance of the relational and the structural to define leadership in collaboration as,

‘individual and/or organizational action that is based upon a set of social relationships and “makes things happen” (Huxham and Vangen 2000), often through influencing the
actions of others (see also Bass, 1990) via the production and reproduction of structures’ (Sydow et al., 2011, p.330).

It is clearly impossible to attempt to resolve here the agency / structure debate which extends throughout the social sciences, but I note the impact of the debate in the IOR literature on the research which is reported in this thesis. The debate draws attention to the significance of structural context for leadership, and to the extent to which participants perceive that they are able to act autonomously within the structural constraints of collaborative contexts. These issues are pertinent to the dual focus of the research questions on the practice of collaboration by individuals and the significance of the context in which they are embedded, at both national policy and local levels.

Secondly, this debate also draws attention to the potential significance of different collaborative structures for the practice of leadership. Inter-organisational collaboration takes many forms, and leadership challenges and practices may differ in relation to these different structures and the position of individual leaders within them (Provan and Kenis, 2008). While some inter-organisational collaborations are legal entities employing their own staff, others are led by one of the collaborating organisations, and others take the form of informal networks.

In the discussion of leadership which follows I will focus on the practice of those who are recognised as leaders in their own organisation, and who seek to contribute to ‘making things happen’ (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b) in the collaborative context, impacting on the agenda and direction of that collaboration. I will also highlight the structural context of the collaboration in which the research is placed, and the position of the leader in relation to that
structure to explore how specific contexts, and perceptions of context impact on individual practice.

2.4.3.2 Who leads in inter-organisational collaboration?

Collaboration research suggests that enactment of leadership in the collaborative context is not limited to individuals with position or hierarchical authority. If leadership is conceptualised as ‘making things happen’ (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b), then it can be enacted by all participants from their different positions within the collaboration. While ‘sponsors’ lead from positions of status and authority, ‘champions’ act from commitment to social change rather than formal position (Crosby and Bryson, 2005). This is not to suggest though that hierarchy is absent from collaborations focused on social change. Participants will often continue to do the bulk of their work in a hierarchical context (Agranoff, 2006), and empirical studies evidence continuity of decision-making processes and hierarchical structures (Armistead et al 2007, Newman 2005, McGuire 2006). Thus, hierarchy and network co-exist (McGuire, 2006), and ‘lateral connections seem to overlay the hierarchy rather than act as a replacement’ (Agranoff, 2006, p.57).

This analysis suggests that while all may lead, the experience of all who do so will not be the same, as it will relate to their position within these multiple layers of relationships. This in turn suggests that the experience and practice of voluntary sector leaders will not be the same as that of public sector participants or partnership managers, as they occupy a different place in collaboration structures and the various networks and hierarchies which impinge on those
structures. Consequently, they experience the processes of collaboration differently, as they represent their own organisation and frequently the wider sector. This distinction is not always fully surfaced by researchers. In the discussion which follows I will highlight the focus of different researchers on the public manager, the partnership manager, and the representative of external organisations, including voluntary sector organisations and networks. Although there may be overlap and transferable learning from each of these, this distinction highlights the significance of the different experience of actors from different organisational perspectives.

One important stream in the collaboration literature derives from the discipline of public administration, and highlights changes in public management in an increasingly interconnected world. This highlights the role of the public sector manager who is embedded in the bureaucracy and hierarchical structure of public agencies, but who also increasingly engages in a web of relationships across organisational boundaries, both within public agencies and beyond (Agranoff, 2006, Agranoff, 2007, Agranoff and McGuire, 2001, Agranoff and McGuire, 2003, Bingham and O'Leary, 2008, O'Leary and Bingham, 2009a, O'Leary and Vij, 2012). These inter-organisational relationships reach beyond the contractual to joint service provision, co-management and a collaborative approach to policy implementation and strategy development. Although the public sector manager finds herself spending an increasing percentage of her time working with other organisations, in different collaborative contexts, she remains accountable to the employing public agency, and works with others to achieve the purposes and policies of that agency (Crosby and Bryson, 2005).
In contrast, another group of authors focus on individuals who lead the whole network or partnership (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b, Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010, Saz-Carranza and Ospina, 2011, Vangen and Huxham, 2003a). This role is frequently enacted by a ‘partnership manager’, who is tasked specifically with the management and maintenance of the collaboration (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b, Vangen and Huxham, 2003a). The partnership manager may be employed by the collaboration or a separate network administration organisation (NAO) set up to manage the collaboration (Provan and Kenis, 2008). Frequently individuals in these roles are employed within collaborating agencies, and (formally or informally) seconded to the collaboration. Although there will be a continuing relationship with and potential loyalty to the seconding agency, their focus is on the processes and outcomes of the collaboration, and their accountability to the collaboration is likely to be stronger than their accountability to any one of the collaborating agencies (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b). Partnership managers often have no direct hierarchical authority over participants from other agencies, but they will frequently be the most informed, and have a clear view on the direction the partnership should take. Where collaborations adopt the governance structure of an NAO (Provan and Kenis, 2008), partnership managers and other NAO employees are tasked with the maintenance of the collaboration on behalf of the participating organisations (Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010). Partnership managers are thus recognisably leaders of the collaboration.

Although many of the authors discussed here acknowledge that other participants may contribute leadership in the sense of ‘making things happen’ in the collaborative context, there

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4 An NAO is a form of network governance in which ‘a separate administrative entity is set up specifically to govern the network and its activities’ (Provan and Kenis, 2008, p.236).
is little discussion in the collaboration literature of this contribution. In contrast, the voluntary sector literature focuses on the different demands on leaders from the sector who engage in collaboration, as they seek to represent their own organisation, the wider voluntary sector, and a cause or mission associated with those organisations, and with communities of interest or place (Bush, 2006, Gazley, 2008, Gazley, 2010, Goldman and Kahnweiler, 2000). They develop relationships with key individuals, which reach beyond formal meetings and commissioning arrangements into informal working relationships (Bush, 2006, Gazley, 2008). At the same time, they continue to lead within their own organisation, which is often contracted to deliver services on behalf of public agencies with which they also partner (Milbourne, 2009, Najam, 2000), leading to potential conflicting priorities and interests. This leads to advice to recruiters in the sector to add skills in collaboration to the long list of requirements for senior voluntary sector leaders (Goldman and Kahnweiler, 2000).

The distinction made here between the perspective of public sector manager, partnership manager and voluntary sector leader highlights the potential differences in participants’ experience of collaboration, in terms of their relationship to the collaborating organisations and the collaboration itself. Cross sector collaboration brings together individuals who are leaders in their own organisations, usually in a recognised management position established through internal hierarchy. Over time, trust-based relationships develop between individuals (McGuire, 2006, Vangen and Huxham, 2003b), beyond the vertical hierarchies of single organisations. However, public sector dominance and hierarchical structures are frequently brought into the collaboration, alongside collaborative, networked and trust-based relationships (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001).
The discussion which follows below focuses on evidence in the collaboration literature as to how individuals from these different organisational perspectives lead in these contexts – the roles they adopt, and the activities they engage in. This discussion repeatedly returns to those individuals who are not recognised leaders of collaborations, but who, as leaders in their own organisation, engage in collaboration as participants or ‘partners’, to explore in what ways they can be understood as leaders in collaboration, and to ask how they contribute to making things happen and moving issues forward in the collaborative context.

2.4.3.3 The roles and activities of leaders in collaborative contexts

As called for by Grint (2005), the discussion which follows focuses on the how and what of leadership, rather than the more traditional focus of leadership research on the attributes of leaders. This section of the review highlights the different findings of collaboration researchers in response to the question 'what do leaders do', and the difficulty of synthesising these findings. This difficulty reflects some of the complexities which have been discussed above, including - different theoretical approaches; the significance of context; and the potential differences of perspective of leaders from different organisational participants. However, it is possible to highlight some key issues from this discussion which inform the research reported in this thesis.

Five approaches to the question ‘what do leaders do?’ are explored below:

- The first of these draws on a review of public management networks literature (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001) to summarise four broad areas of activity – activating,
framing, mobilising, and synthesising - which appear to relate to the stages of
development of a collaboration;

- The second approach draws on the description in the IOR literature of 'leadership for
  the common good', later described by the same authors as 'integrative leadership'
  (Crosby and Bryson, 2005, Crosby and Bryson, 2010a, Crosby and Bryson, 2010b). This
  model highlights the role of leaders as change agents who must employ different
  capabilities to engage in the multiple tasks of leadership to create public value. In its
  later iteration, the model particularly highlights activities which contribute to the tasks
  of alignment and integration. It is again primarily addressed to managers from public
  agencies (Crosby and Bryson, 2005);

- The third approach highlights the apparently contradictory activities of partnership
  managers, which derive from the paradoxical nature of inter-organisational
  collaboration, and the consequent need for both facilitative leadership ('in the spirit of
  collaboration') and a more directive approach ('towards collaborative thuggery')
  (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a);

- The fourth approach also draws on an understanding of the paradoxical nature of
  inter-organisational collaboration, focusing on the need for both unity and diversity,
  and on the management of dialogue and conflict, observed in the work of employees
  of network administration organisations (NAOs) (Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010, Saz-
  Carranza and Ospina, 2011).

- The final model discussed here (Williams, 2002, Williams, 2010, Williams, 2013)
  describes the activities of leaders as boundary spanners who move from their own
  organisation into the collaborative space, and back again.

Each of these approaches is summarised in Table 2 below.
Table 2: Summary of leadership roles and activities

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<tr>
<td>Leadership tasks for the collaborative public manager</td>
<td>Leadership capabilities of collaborative public managers</td>
<td>Leadership collaborative advantage - activities of partnership managers</td>
<td>Boundary spanner roles and tasks</td>
<td>Leading whole networks through NAOs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activating - identifying participants,</td>
<td>Leadership in context - understanding context and</td>
<td>In the spirit of collaboration:</td>
<td>Reticulist - managing interdependencies, both organizational and interpersonal</td>
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<tr>
<td>- drawing on their skills, knowledge and expertise;</td>
<td>identifying potential Personal leadership</td>
<td>- Embracing the ‘right kind’ of members</td>
<td>Entrepreneur - developing new solutions Interpreter / Communicator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Framing - Establishing rules,</td>
<td>- understanding and deploying personal assets Team</td>
<td>- Empowering members to enable participation</td>
<td>- liaising, gatekeeping, disseminating, interpreting</td>
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<tr>
<td>- influencing values and norms,</td>
<td>leadership Organisation leadership</td>
<td>- Involving and supporting all members</td>
<td>Coordinator - Coordinating, planning and servicing</td>
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<tr>
<td>- altering perceptions,</td>
<td>- nurturing effective, humane organisations Visionary</td>
<td>- Mobilizing members to make things happen</td>
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<td>- introducing new ideas</td>
<td>leadership - creating and communicating vision</td>
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<td>Mobilizing - getting individuals to commit,</td>
<td>- interpreting Political leadership - mediating conflict</td>
<td>Towards collaborative thuggery - manipulating the</td>
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<td>- encouraging members to maintain commitment, and</td>
<td>- making &amp; implementing decisions Ethical leadership</td>
<td>collaborative agenda - Playing the politics</td>
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<td>- to engage their organizations.</td>
<td>- sanctioning behavior and adjudicating Policy</td>
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<td>Synthesising - reducing complexity and uncertainty,</td>
<td>entrepreneurship - coordinating leadership tasks</td>
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<td>- removing blockages,</td>
<td>over policy cycle</td>
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<tr>
<td>- encouraging ongoing interaction to facilitate</td>
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<td>further interaction</td>
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In the spirit of collaboration:
- Embracing the ‘right kind’ of members
- Empowering members to enable participation
- Involving and supporting all members
- Mobilizing members to make things happen

Towards collaborative thuggery
- manipulating the collaborative agenda
- Playing the politics

Reticulist
- managing interdependencies, both organizational and interpersonal

Entrepreneur
- developing new solutions Interpreter / Communicator
- liaising, gatekeeping, disseminating, interpreting

Coordinator - Coordinating, planning and servicing

Fostering unity in diversity:
- Bridging work:
  - facilitating and mediating member interaction; promoting openness and participation
- Framing work:
  - setting the stage for concerted action;
- Capacitating work:
  - nurturing personal relationships, constructing community.

Promoting dialogue and managing confrontation:
- maintaining credibility
  - Multilevel working
  - Cultivating multiple relationships
These lists are not intended to be exhaustive, but the authors’ different approaches draw attention to leadership activities for different phases of collaboration development, different purposes, in different styles, and from the perspective of different roles. They suggest that activities associated with different roles, purposes, phases and styles of leadership are frequently enacted simultaneously, rather than sequentially, and that this at times results in evidence of apparently contradictory behaviours (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a). Thus, although the authors state that these lists are not intended as lists of the skills and abilities which an individual leader must possess (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001, Crosby and Bryson, 2005), they do draw a picture of a multi-faceted role which is enormously demanding. Consequently, each model highlights dilemmas and tensions which arise for leaders. The significance of concepts of ‘tensions’ for leadership in collaboration is explored further in section 2.4.5 below.

Many of the activities of leaders listed here are associated with the purpose of achieving integration across the collaborating organisations:

‘The leader ... elicits common goals, creates an atmosphere of trust, brokers organizational and individual contributions, and deploys energies in accord with some strategic plan.’ (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001, p.314)

The work of integration highlights the tasks of bringing together different organisations, smoothing difference, and aligning ‘conditions, processes, structures, governance, contingencies and constraints, outcomes and accountabilities....’ (Bryson et al., 2006, p.52).

This synthesising work builds on that which is common to partners (Crosby, 2010), creating the environment for continuing collaboration, and ultimately delivering services which are
experienced by users as ‘seamless’ (Connelly, 2007). Building on the integrative leadership model, Page focuses attention on leadership tactics of framing, convening, and deliberation, which influence stakeholder interpretations, leading to shared understanding and joint problem solving (Page, 2010). However, in a further development of the model, Ospina and Saz-Carranza (2010) argue that the work of integration, and corresponding emphasis on that which is shared, must be accompanied by attention to differentiation, which recognises the unique contribution of each participant to the collaboration.

The focus on integration highlights the association of leadership in collaboration with ‘collaborative’ behaviours, in the sense of those behaviours which draw the players together, facilitate, and encourage participation. However, there is also evidence that the work of facilitation may need to be accompanied by a persistent proactive, and even directive, leadership approach (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a).

In their study of the activities of partnership managers, Vangen and Huxham recognise the continuing need for activities which reflect a directive or autocratic approach in the collaborative context (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a). Here they distinguish between facilitative activities ‘in the spirit of collaboration’, and more directive activities, ‘towards collaborative thuggery’. Facilitative activities include ‘embracing, empowering, involving and mobilizing’ the members of a collaboration, reflecting a democratic style of leadership (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a). Leaders represent, mobilise, enthuse and empower in order to enable participants to engage with the collaboration and work together, but these activities do not always result in positive outcomes (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b). Directive activities are often also necessary in order to move the collaboration forward and avoid inertia. These activities include
‘manipulating the collaborative agenda’ and ‘playing the politics’ (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a). Rather than representing alternatives, these two approaches are frequently enacted simultaneously:

‘opposing styles and types of leadership are seen as operating together and all of the time’ (ibid p.573).

Vangen and Huxham (2003a) argue that both of these approaches – the facilitative and the directive or authoritative - are necessary to the nurture of the collaboration. An overemphasis on either activities in the spirit of collaboration, or those towards collaborative thuggery, is unlikely to lead to collaborative advantage. Instead, the partnership manager is advised to work with the tension between the two, operating from both perspectives, switching between them, or frequently acting from both perspectives simultaneously. This view is supported by other collaboration researchers:

‘setting the right conditions and seeking to build collaborative cultures may be insufficient in themselves, and, paradoxically, strong hierarchical leadership may be required in particular circumstances or at particular stages of the collaborative process...’ (Williams and Sullivan, 2011, pp.15-16).

Williams also acknowledges the need for leaders to be both participative and directive in his boundary spanning model of leadership (Williams, 2002, Williams, 2013). Leaders must be able to work with conflict which inevitably arises from the different interests of the
collaborating organisations, but to do so using skills of bargaining and negotiation (Feyerherm, 1994, Gray, 1989, O'Leary and Vij, 2012).

Williams’ boundary spanning model (Williams, 2002, Williams, 2013) was originally applied to managers with specific boundary spanning responsibilities (2002), but in his more recent paper (2013) Williams asks if ‘we are all boundary spanners now?’ The boundary spanning concept draws attention to collaboration participants as those who move from their host organisation into the collaborative domain and out again, and consequently to the individual’s continuing relationship with the host organisation. Williams concludes that, while the experience of those with specific partnership responsibilities and other participants is not the same, boundary spanning, and the associated roles and activities, is an inevitable part of the role of all those whose work relates to the public policy process. He notes that boundary spanners from all backgrounds frequently engage in collaborative contexts where they have no formal power in terms of authority or hierarchical position. Even when they are working on behalf of public agencies authorised by the state, their authority does not reach into the partner agencies they seek to engage in policy implementation. Consequently, he suggests that they seek to influence outcomes by engaging in apparently manipulative activities, which reflect Vangen and Huxham’s ‘playing the politics’ and ‘manipulating the agenda’ (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a). In pursuit of influence, boundary spanners draw on sources of power which lie beyond the authority of public agencies and policy, including the power of meaning, and of control of information, expertise and knowledge (Williams, 2013).
2.4.3.4 Interim conclusions

This discussion of leadership activities focuses attention on the pluralistic aspects of acting in this domain – the multiple roles and styles enacted simultaneously, the apparently contradictory styles and behaviours. Rather than providing a synthesised list of activities, the picture presented here instead highlights how the complexity of the inter-organisational domain leads to trade-offs, compromises and contradictions in the activities of leaders. In addition, the activities of leaders in collaboration are related to that individual’s position in the inter-organisational context – their relationship to the collaborating organisations and the collaboration itself and the web of vertical and horizontal relationships.

These models each draw attention to the difficult decisions and dilemmas which face leaders in collaboration. The literature frequently presents these as ‘tensions’. However, different authors’ uses of the term ‘tensions’ do not all appear to be compatible with each other. In section 2.4.5 below, I will discuss the different uses of this term in the literature, to describe the experience of leading in the collaborative domain. However, as the research discussed above has focused on the roles of public and partnership managers, I will first pause to reflect on empirical papers which describe leadership enacted by other participants in collaborative contexts.

2.4.4 Leadership enacted by participants

In this section, I discuss the findings of empirical papers which specifically draw attention to the enactment of leadership by individuals who are not associated with lead public agencies, or
employed as partnership managers, but rather act to ‘make things happen’ on behalf of their own organisation or group of organisations. The aim here is to draw out the lessons of empirical studies which may be relevant to those acting on behalf of voluntary and community organisations - leaders who are frequently engaged in multiple partnerships across sector boundaries (Babiak and Thibault, 2009). This section of the review repeatedly highlights the link made by researchers between the enactment of leadership and the operation of power in the collaborative context.

In a paper which applies the boundary spanning concept to managers of voluntary organisations, Tsasis (2009) describes how these managers take information from the collaboration, which they disseminate back in their own organisations and the wider sector. At the same time, they represent sector interests and act as agents of influence with a wide range of stakeholders, including public agencies. Thus, they are continually responding to and managing the threefold interests of their own organisation, the wider sector, and the collaboration. However, Tsasis argues that the day to day reality of the activities of boundary spanning is found in the multiple interactions between individuals, rather than at the inter-organisational level.

This approach might be described as ‘bridging’, a concept which is developed by Ospina and Foldy (2010) in a paper which focuses on the leadership role enacted by small social change organisations collaborating with dominant public agencies. These organisations seek to take forward their mission by developing connectedness across organisational boundaries. Leaders from disempowered, resource poor social change organisations ‘build bridges’ between competing perspectives, thus nurturing the development of interdependence, whilst
continuing to advance their own organisational mission. The processes of bridging both build relationship, and generate multiple meanings and perspectives. Thus, the process of meaning making is embedded in relationship, as well as related to historical structures of power.

From their empirical research, Ospina and Foldy (2010) identify five leadership practices which leaders from social change organisations adopt:

1. Prompting cognitive shifts.
2. Naming and shaping identity.
3. Engaging in dialogue about difference.
4. Creating equitable governance mechanisms.
5. Weaving multiple worlds together through interpersonal relationships.

With the exception of point 4, these practices lie beneath structures, and do not rely on outward forms of power centred on governance arrangements and control of resources. Instead, they draw attention to discursive elements of leadership practice. In addition, the paper highlights two assumptions which underlie these practices – ‘minimizing power inequalities’ and ‘recognizing the strategic value of difference’ (Ospina and Foldy, 2010, p.301) – thus linking the discursive and relational with structure and the power relationship between participating organisations.

The concept of ‘collateral leadership’, developed by Alexander et al in their empirical study of community health partnerships (Alexander et al., 2001), is also an attempt to describe the leadership of those who act on behalf of participating organisations, rather than public agency
leads. This concept has some similarities to mainstream theories of ‘distributed’ or ‘dispersed leadership’ (Bryman, 1996), in that it focuses on the horizontal, rather than vertical axis of leadership, but is understood to exist alongside, rather than replace, hierarchy. Collateral leadership is enacted through the informal influence of partnership participants who generate ideas, offer different perspectives, bring new knowledge to the partnership, and provide a conduit between formal leadership and wider stakeholders. Here the focus is again on discursive elements of leadership, but also on links with the community as a source of expertise, and a key resource in the collaborative context. A collateral leader may come to the fore on one issue, on which she has particular expertise, but be less visible on another issue. Unlike collaboration champions (Crosby and Bryson, 2005), collateral leaders do not attempt to maintain a vision for the whole partnership, nor are they required to focus on day to day maintenance, as are those who enact formal leadership as partnership managers.

Again, this discussion of leadership is closely linked to discussion of the sources and operation of power. The concept of collateral leadership suggests that partnership members draw power from distinctiveness founded in their ability to engage with segments of the community whose voice is otherwise unheard (Alexander et al., 2001). It also reinforces the significance of the sharing of power by those with formally authorised roles. Counter-intuitively, the power of all increases as it is shared:

‘leadership increases its control by giving up some of its authority...Sharing power creates a sense of shared ownership and mutual accountability that empowers not only partnership members but also leaders.’ (ibid p.169)
Advice from the voluntary sector studies literature suggests that collaborative leaders should avoid ‘relationships based on narrowly defined or poorly shared authority’ (Bush, 2006), but these empirical studies repeatedly reinforce the locus of formal authority in public agencies as a key factor in the practice of collaboration.

Purdue’s (2005) research focuses on community leaders in the context of regeneration partnerships, highlighting the difficulties of sustaining that leadership, and the potential for burnout. Individuals, who may be employees or volunteers, are frequently engaged in several government programmes, and corresponding partnerships and working groups. There are cycles of community leadership, and frequent programme and policy changes, and Purdue notes the fragility, instability and impermanence of relationships between individuals in these contexts. As in Ospina and Foldy’s (2010) work, these leaders represent communities which are recognised as disempowered, disadvantaged and disengaged, who participate in collaborative programmes and partnership bodies where control is retained by the public agency. Thus, this leadership role is frequently an uncomfortable one,

‘squeezed between incorporation into the structures of the state on the one hand and representation of the interests of often quite excluded elements of civil society on the other.’ (Purdue, 2005, p.248)

Drawing on the exit/voice model of civic and organisational change (Hirschman, 1970), Purdue contrasts the active concepts of ‘exit’ and ‘voice’ with the more passive options of ‘loyalty’ to the status quo and ‘alienation’. While ‘exit’ is modelled on consumer choice, and emphasises the individual’s option to withdraw cooperation and engagement, ‘voice’ focuses on seeking
change both by indicating the change that participants want to see, and seeking inclusion in the change process. ‘Voice’ can be conceptualised as dissent, frequently evidenced in short bursts of activity, followed by grudging loyalty – this sets up a ‘win/lose’ dichotomy, which assumes that power is a zero-sum resource. More positively, ‘voice’ can be conceptualised as an open-ended conversation which is more exploratory, offers new discourses, and is a win/win concept, amplifying the power of those engaged, without removing it from others.

Purdue concludes that:

‘Partnership working sometimes provides the fragile new spaces of local governance in which these collaborative conversations can take place across organizational and sectoral boundaries. Community leaders do sometimes find themselves able to engage in the partnership and wider leadership coalition discussions.’ (ibid p.263)

Purdue poses two key questions with regard to the outcomes of the engagement of community and voluntary sector leaders - do they become accepted as players in the acknowledged local ‘leadership coalition’; and, do they achieve new resources for the communities they represent? However, he suggests that there are two other possible outcomes of engagement in partnership bodies:

1. Co-option - ‘when community leaders are accepted as players...but there are no gains for their community’; and
2. Pre-emption – ‘when the community receives tangible gains, but community leaders receive no recognition for playing a part in the dispensation.’ (ibid p.260-261)
Purdue argues that in practice, the community leaders in this study were subject to a degree to both co-option and pre-emption. They expressed frustration that they were given responsibilities but no authority, they were informed of decisions after they were made, and the interests of the local authority dominated. However, Purdue also notes that the impact and influence of community leaders is frequently hidden, and any credit is given to the local authority. Crucially, the roles open to community leaders are limited by their more powerful (public sector) partners.

This study draws attention to several key issues specific to voluntary and community sector leaders in the collaborative context. Firstly, it acknowledges the difficulties and ambiguities of sector and community representation, including the volunteer status of many community representatives, in contrast to the employed status of public sector managers. Secondly, it again draws attention to the significance of power in understanding cross-sector collaboration, and the experience of VCO leaders of the operation of power, as they report exclusion from decision making, and of being allowed to engage and participate (or not) by the dominant public agencies. Purdue highlights the difficulties of working collaboratively with public agencies, whilst maintaining a focus on the community, pointing to the danger of co-option into the agenda of public agencies, and consequently of contributing to the maintenance of the status quo. Although the significance of the interpersonal aspect of collaboration is noted, from the voluntary and community perspective, the impermanence of these relationships is clear. However, the concept of ‘voice’ indicates the possibility of the discursive enactment of power, even by these apparently powerless participants. In addition, relationship with the community is a source of expertise and therefore of power, which legitimises the engagement of leaders from community organisations.
In summary, these empirical studies of participant leadership draw attention both to leadership enactment, and to the relationships of power between organisations which provide the context for that enactment. The ability of participants to influence, to impact on the agenda and direction of the collaboration, is repeatedly linked to underlying power relationships between the collaborating organisations. As a result, voluntary sector participants in empirical research frequently express their frustration, sense of disempowerment, and inability to ‘make things happen’. It is easy to conclude that collaborating across sectors is a facade of ‘partnership’ which legitimises the decision-making which takes place behind the scenes; or that collaboration is only possible when organisations with formal power set that power aside; or perhaps when enacted by uniquely skilled and determined individuals.

However, there are suggestions in these studies that leaders from voluntary and community organisations do contribute to ‘making things happen’ in the collaborative context, despite the asymmetry of formal power, based on the authority of the state in public agencies. This echoes the warning of Craig et al (2004) to avoid the reduction of the relationship between the public sector and VCOs to an over-simplistic dichotomy of independence and incorporation. Similarly, Crouch (2011) suggests that voluntary sector leaders should think in terms of managing multiple inter-dependencies across organisational and sector boundaries.

In the review above, two positive issues come to the fore – the significance of the perception of the voluntary sector leader’s relationship with the community as a legitimising factor, and the opportunities which collaboration offers to engage with, and potentially change,
dominating discourses of social problems and their solutions. I will return to both of these issues at various points throughout this thesis (see Chapters 6 and 7).

2.4.5 Leadership and tensions

The theme of tensions is an increasing focus in the IOR literature (Das and Teng, 2000, Huxham and Beech, 2003, Huxham and Vangen, 2005, Provan and Kenis, 2008, Saz-Carranza and Ospina, 2011, Vangen and Winchester, 2013, Vlaar et al., 2007). I will here distinguish between three different but related uses of the term in relation to leadership in collaborative contexts. The first of these captures the individual’s experience; the second describes an inherent feature of inter-organisational collaboration; and the third provides conceptualisations which are useful to management practice.

2.4.5.1 Tensions as a descriptor

The first use of the term is to describe the individual’s *experience* of leading in the collaborative context (O’Leary and Bingham, 2009b, Williams, 2013). This use of the term focuses on the difficult choices which individuals make, the trade-offs and compromises. It highlights the competing pressures, the dilemma of choosing between two (or more) apparently reasonable responses to the challenges of collaborating (Huxham and Beech, 2003). An example here is the choice to focus on dealing with conflict in collaboration through bargaining and negotiation, rather than responding with confrontation (O’Leary and Bingham, 2009b). Exercising too much confrontation risks alienating other participants; too little confrontation
and there is a risk of absorption into the dominant perspective. The literature suggests that such tensions are common in inter-organisational contexts, due to the competing interests and perspectives brought to the collaboration. I refer to these tensions later in the thesis as ‘experienced tensions’.

2.4.5.2 Inherent tensions

The second use of the term is to describe tensions which, it is argued, are inherent in the nature of inter-organisational collaborations; they are unavoidable due to the complex and even paradoxical nature of inter-organisational collaboration (Huxham and Vangen, 2005, Lasker et al., 2001, Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010, Saz-Carranza and Ospina, 2011, Vangen and Huxham, 2012, Vangen and Winchester, 2013). A key expression of this is the unity/diversity tension which is fundamental to achieving collaborative advantage (Huxham and Vangen, 2005, Saz-Carranza and Ospina, 2011). While collaboration necessarily draws attention to that which the collaborating organisations share, the theory of collaborative advantage (Huxham and Vangen, 2005) recognises that advantage is only achieved by drawing on the distinctive contribution of each organisation. Differences between partners cannot and should not be elided – these differences are essential to achieving the synergy through which collaborative advantage is achieved (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Instead, leaders should seek to manage the tensions which inevitably arise from bringing together diverse partners (Saz-Carranza and Ospina, 2011).

This understanding of collaboration emphasises a ‘both and’ rather than ‘either or’ approach to paradoxical aspects of collaboration:
‘As leaders tried to make things happen, they were confronted with managing paradoxical realities...In this work, they found the means to ensure that both sides of the paradox were honoured.’ (Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010, p.414)

Thus, the emphasis on that which partners share, associated with the leadership tasks of alignment and integration (Crosby and Bryson, 2005), is allied to a simultaneous emphasis on the diversity and differentiation of collaborating organisations (Connelly et al., 2008, O'Leary and Bingham, 2009b, Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010).

2.4.5.3 Conceptualising tensions

The third use of the term is in the theoretical conceptualisation of management tensions which provide ‘handles for reflective practice’ (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). This theoretical approach acknowledges the inevitable tensions in inter-organisational collaboration, as above, and explores alternative ways of managing these, exposing the negative and positive aspects of each of these alternatives (Huxham and Beech, 2003, Vangen and Winchester, 2013). It is a way of presenting extremes of action as equally valid alternate ‘good practice’ responses to the tensions inherent in collaboration, and helping leaders to position themselves in relation to these alternative extremes (Huxham and Beech, 2003, Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Both extremes are likely to be difficult if not impossible in practice, and practitioners will often find themselves at a point between the two extremes. The theoretical conceptualisations provide tools to aid reflective practice, enabling the reflective practitioner to manage the ‘store of possibilities’ (Huxham and Vangen, 2005, p.234).
An example (ibid p.217) relates to the difficult issue of managing aims in collaborative practice, where each collaborating organisation brings their different aims to the collaboration. While common practice wisdom asserts that moving collaboration forward is dependent on agreement over aims, in practice, such agreement is very difficult to find. Consequently, alternative advice suggests that participants act together on shared tasks, without first agreeing joint aims, but this can lead to later difficulties in the collaboration, when the divergent aims of organisations emerge. An intermediate position might be to seek enough initial agreement to make initial progress. This conceptual tension is represented in the figure below:

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 1: Tensions in managing aims in collaborative settings**

This conceptual presentation of tensions provides tools for reflective practice, which aid practitioners to think about the alternatives available to them, and to make active choices. It increases awareness of the issues likely to arise in collaboration, and the options available to address them.

2.4.5.4 Interim conclusions

In the text which follows I will use the terms ‘experienced tension’, ‘inherent tension’ and ‘management tension’ to distinguish between the three uses of the term tension in the literature. While each of the approaches to the topic of tensions in collaboration discussed here operates at a different level, they all reinforce the point that there is no one best way to enact leadership in these contexts. They draw attention to the difficult choices leaders make, and the potentially negative as well as positive outcomes of those choices, even when following apparently good practice advice.

They also draw attention to the impact of the specific features of different collaborative contexts – the choice made in one context is not necessarily the best in a second collaboration, or even at a later stage in the first. Studies which explore leadership collaborative contexts suggest that the complexity of those contexts, the ambiguity, tensions and paradoxical nature of collaboration, leads to a parallel complexity in the practice of leadership (Connelly, 2007, Connelly et al., 2008, Huxham and Vangen, 2000b, O’Leary et al., 2009, Vangen and Huxham, 2003a). Leadership is responsive to this multi-layered context, it is adaptive, and ‘bound up in daily iterations of enactment’ (Connelly, 2007, p.1244).
2.4.6 Conclusions - Leadership

The models of leadership explored in this chapter indicate that leadership in collaborative contexts is not confined to an association with position or formal authority, but also with influence enacted by participants without authority, through less overt forms of power, including manipulation, political strategies, and the shaping of meaning. These forms of leadership may be enacted by any participant, shaping and driving forward the agenda, ‘making things happen’ (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b) in collaborative contexts.

This review has suggested though that leadership looks different from the perspective of different participating organisations and their sector positioning. Participants from voluntary and community organisations face a potential sense of disempowerment when collaborating with public agencies; but focusing on their relationship with the community, on their ability to bring ideas to the table, and consequently shape the collaborative discourse, suggests that they too can impact on the collaborative agenda. Through boundary spanning and bridging activities they bring their priorities and ideas into the collaboration, returning to the home organisation with fresh resources of ideas and knowledge, and sometimes finance too.

This discussion also draws attention to the inter-organisational relationships of power which lie behind the interaction of individuals as they participate in collaboration across sector boundaries. The topic of power is explored further below.
2.5 Power in collaborative contexts

2.5.1 Introduction

The literature suggests then that the enactment of leadership in collaborative contexts is closely associated with the nature of the relationship between the collaborating organisations, and to the individual leader’s position within that relationship. This discussion points towards the significance of the operation of power in the inter-organisational relationship, and the consequences of the power relationship for participants. Indeed, Agranoff and McGuire argue that power must take centre stage in analyses of inter-organisational relationships (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001).

In this section, I move on from the focus on leadership to look at research which directly addresses the issue of the operation of power in collaboration for social change. Huxham and Beech characterise the wielding of power as ‘the ability to influence, control, or resist the activities of others’ (Huxham and Beech, 2008, p.555), but note that collaboration researchers view its significance from different perspectives, which it is difficult to synthesise. One approach strongly associates the dispersal of power with inter-organisational collaboration (Crosby, 2010, Gray, 1985, Gray, 1989, Hardy and Phillips, 1998b), suggesting that ‘shared power’ enables collaboration. However, many inter-organisational contexts in the public policy domain are characterised by power asymmetry, dominated by public agencies which are authorised by the state and control significant resources, on which other participants depend. This raises questions as to how collaboration proceeds in such contexts, and the implications for those seeking to contribute to leadership on behalf of less overtly powerful participants. It
leads us to ask whether there are possible alternative understandings of power in collaboration, which are not confined to the enactment of authority and control of resources.

I will discuss below three approaches to power in the collaboration literature, which focus on the power relationship between collaborating organisations:


- Secondly, I consider models of power in the IOR literature which suggest a more nuanced understanding of the operation of power in the collaborative context (Hardy and Phillips, 1998b, Hardy et al., 2003, Huxham and Beech, 2008, Huxham and Vangen, 2005). These identify multiple sources of power and levels at which power operates, as well as exploring the purposes of power. They draw attention to the enactment of power in daily practice.

- Thirdly, I draw attention to an approach which relates the enactment of leadership in collaboration to three domains of power (Crosby and Bryson, 2005). This approach focuses on how leaders can work within these three domains to impact on the collaborative agenda, moving some issues forward and diverting others to become non-issues.
2.5.2 The shared power assumption

IOR researchers link collaboration with the sharing or dispersal of power amongst participants (Crosby and Bryson, 2005, Gray, 1985, Gray, 1989, Hardy and Phillips, 1998b). Researchers argue that ‘shared power’, balanced across participants, leads to the shared ownership of a problem, and consequently to a joint approach to decision making:

‘Collaboration operates on a model of shared power. In collaboration, problem-solving decisions are eventually taken by a group of stakeholders who have mutually authorized each other to reach a decision. Thus, power to define the problem and to propose a solution is effectively shared among the decision makers.’ (Gray 1989, p. 119).

These authors draw on an assumption that the interests of all parties are promoted by collaboration, as sharing power increases the capacity of all:

‘A shared-power arrangement enhances the power of the participants beyond the sum of their separate capabilities.’ (Crosby and Bryson 2005 p.29)

This is not to suggest that power should necessarily be equalised across all participants. Indeed, Gray argues that the equal distribution of power can lead to inaction, but that ‘sufficient distribution of power is necessary to insure that all stakeholders can influence direction-setting’ (Gray, 1985). This understanding of the inter-organisational relationship therefore suggests that a significant power imbalance or asymmetry between partners may
hinder successful collaboration, with weaker partners becoming dependent or vulnerable to the decisions of those who control resources (Gray and Hay, 1986). In addition, inequalities established through earlier inter-organisational interactions are brought forward into new collaborative arrangements (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2000)

This perspective highlights some of the issues which arise in the context of inter-organisational relationships between public and voluntary sectors, where the former carries the weight of state authorisation and controls state resources. In this context, the voluntary sector literature questions the continuing independence of VCOs (Clifford et al., 2010, Lewis, 2005), highlighting the potential for conflict with the public sector (Craig et al., 2004), and for competition between voluntary sector organisations (Milbourne, 2009). The dominance of public agencies, as presented in this literature, draws a picture of a dependent, disempowered voluntary sector, struggling to maintain its distinctiveness.

Hardy and Phillips (1998b) question whether the term ‘collaboration’ is an appropriate description for the inter-organisational relationship in contexts which evidence such an imbalance of power. Although I use the term collaboration in a wider sense\(^5\) to include relationships which are both more and less ‘balanced’ between participant organisations, this discussion helpfully draws attention to the consequences of power asymmetry and the dominance of one organisational participant for that collaboration.

\(^5\) See Table 1 above.
2.5.3 Alternative models of power

However, IOR researchers do offer alternative perspectives on the operation of power, perspectives which suggest that power may operate at levels which lie beneath initial perceptions of the dominance of one participant or group of participants. These alternative approaches to power in the collaborative context focus on the identification of multiple sources, levels and purposes of the operation of power:

- Sources of power include formal authority, control of resources and discursive legitimacy (Hardy and Phillips, 1998b), but also network and strategic centrality, and uniqueness (Huxham and Beech, 2008). These are macro sources of power, based on need, importance and structural position, but power also operates at the micro level of day to day interactions (ibid).

- Power operates at both macro and micro levels, creating an infrastructure of power (Huxham and Beech, 2008, Huxham and Vangen, 2005). While the former may appear to be beyond the control of collaboration participants, individuals may actively engage with ‘points of power’ at the micro level.

- Researchers distinguish between ‘power over’, ‘power to’ and ‘power for’, which relates to the purpose of power in the collaboration context (Agranoff, 2006, Huxham and Beech, 2008, Huxham and Vangen, 2005). While ‘power over’ is associated with the gain of the one who exerts that power, ‘power to’ is associated with the mutual gain of all partners, and ‘power for’ is associated with altruistic gain (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). This provides an interesting perspective on the purposes and beneficiaries of power in collaborations formed to address social issues.
These approaches to power in collaborative contexts are unpacked further below. They suggest that analysing the power relationship through these multiple layers may lead to a more nuanced understanding of the operation of power in inter-organisational collaboration.

2.5.3.1 Sources of Power

Hardy and Phillips (1998b) advise researchers to ask three key questions to identity the operation of power in inter-organisational relationships:

- Who has the formal authority?
- Who controls resources?
- Who controls discursive legitimacy?

Attending to these 3 sources of power – formal authority, resources, and discourse – provides an opportunity to recognise that the operation of power in public sector led collaborations is not confined simply to the public agencies who act on behalf of the state. It draws attention to the significance of resources brought to the table by apparently ‘weaker’ partners; to the power located in an organisation’s choice to participate, bringing those resources to the table, or not; to its relationship with the community as both a resource and a source of legitimacy; and to the contribution made to the naming and shaping of the issues on which the collaboration is focused. Participants who appear less powerful may hold important resources of knowledge and information which shape the discourse of the collaboration, which is otherwise dominated by the discourse of public policy.
However, this tri-partite division of sources of power also reinforces the complexity of addressing power issues in the context of complex social issues. While the dominance of public agencies often appears clear in these contexts, as they draw on formal authority and control significant resources, public sector actors are also constrained in less obvious ways, related to the discursive power of public policy and to legitimacy. They are limited by expectations and processes, which policy demands, and society deems appropriate (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2000) – useful examples include equal opportunities policy, or expectations of political representatives or civil servants. Newman (2005) shows how public leaders drawn from different sectors, who are committed to transformational change, both make use of and are constrained by policy discourses. This in turn draws attention to operation of power at the micro level of daily interactions, described by Huxham and Beech as ‘the missing link’ (Huxham and Beech, 2008, p.567) in models of power in collaboration.

### 2.5.3.2 Levels of power

An understanding of the multiplicity of sources of power draws attention to the level at which power operates, focusing attention beyond overt manifestations of power. Researchers make a distinction between the macro and micro levels (Agranoff, 2006, Hardy and Phillips, 1998b, Huxham and Beech, 2008, Huxham and Vangen, 2005). The former is associated with the formal elements of collaboration, drawing attention to governance structures, the discursive power of public policy, the authority of the state, and control of state resources (Hardy and Phillips, 1998b, Huxham and Vangen, 2005). At the micro level, the focus is on the practice of partnership - the numerous decisions associated with implementation and day to day
practices, and the actions of individuals. For example, the identification of potential partners and invitation to participate is a key area of power at the micro level (Gray and Hay, 1986), which is often controlled by a sponsoring agency.

‘Points of power’ at the micro level also include the choice to participate, the ability to place an item on a meeting agenda, the follow-up from meetings, and the development of collaboration identity through regular interactions (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). These micro points of power are at least potentially open to input from all participants, enacted through the interactions of individuals, rather than at the organisational level. Every point at which individuals may take action, or influence the collaboration discourse, is a ‘potential momentary source of power’ (Huxham and Beech, 2008, p.568), which may enable those who are apparently less powerful to move forward the collaborative agenda.

Although micro points of power are often unrecognised, and so participants fail to actively manipulate them (Huxham and Vangen, 2005), the impact of key individuals on the operation of power at the micro level is recognised in the wider IOR literature. Champions from different backgrounds facilitate partner engagement (Crosby and Bryson, 2005); less powerful players hold powers of veto (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2000); senior officers from participating organisations signal the importance of the partnership to other potential partners; activists and technical experts wield power through their knowledge; and paid staff hold the network together (Agranoff, 2006). Thus, power is displayed in the actions of individuals, as well as through the formal and structural elements of collaborative partnerships.
However, Armistead et al. (2007) warn against focusing on what they refer to as the ‘micro politics’ of interpersonal relationships, at the expense of the macro. They note the danger of the dominance of personality issues and the influence of prior relationships at the micro level, and suggest that insufficient attention to the macro level of systems, structures and processes can lead to the failure of the collaboration.

2.5.3.3 Purposes of power

The above discussion indicates the potential for approaching the topic of power in collaborations through lenses which acknowledge multiple sources of power operating at multiple levels. It also begins to surface the question of the purposes of power – what is power for? While mainstream organisational theory focuses on power for purposes of competition, it is frequently assumed that power in the inter-organisational domain is focused on cooperation (Hardy and Phillips, 1998b). However, some researchers distinguish between ‘power over’, ‘power to’, and ‘power for’, which acknowledges a spectrum of purpose from a party’s own gain, to a focus on the gain of all, and altruistic purposes (Huxham and Beech, 2008, Huxham and Vangen, 2005) (see Figure 2 below).

In this model, ‘power over’ is initially associated with control of the collaborative relationship, and a focus on the gain of one participating organisation, which possesses formal authority and controls resources, as in collaborations led by public agencies, authorised by the state through legislation and policy (Hardy and Phillips, 1998b). However, ‘power over’ also operates at the less overt level of discourse, and the management of meaning (Hardy and Phillips, 1998b, Huxham and Vangen, 2005). At the other end of the power spectrum, ‘power for’ is associated
with the empowerment of communities (Huxham and Vangen, 2005) and models of participative governance (Newman, 2001). It suggests that stronger parties actively share power in order to empower weaker participants. At the intermediate point of the spectrum, ‘power to’ (Huxham and Vangen, 2005) is enacted by one or more participant for the mutual gain of all. It builds on the connections between organisations, and is focused on ‘getting enough cooperation among disparate community elements to get things done’ (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001, p.316). In practice terms, ‘power to’ is seen in actions which maintain the inter-organisational relationship, but also in the contribution made by participants to the shared discourse and the management of meaning, through position statements, questioning, naming, and the interpretation of policy. Through these practices, participants re-direct attention away from the purposes of the single powerful organisation, towards the interests of all participating organisations, and on towards the interests of others (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Thus the distinction between power ‘over’, ‘to’ and ‘for’ draws attention both to the uses of power and to its beneficiaries.
Reproduced from Huxham and Vangen 2005 p. 175, Figure 3.1.

This approach raises difficult questions, though – what does it mean to use power for the good of all, and who determines what is good for all? This reflects the focus in the collaborative leadership literature on the ‘common good’ (Crosby and Bryson, 2005), and the difficulty of identifying this concept in an increasingly fractured society (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2000).

2.5.3.4 Interim conclusions

The above approaches to power in collaboration identify multiple sources of power which operate at different levels, and the potential uses of that power for the good of all, or the good
of single participants. These approaches raise possible alternative understandings of how power might operate in collaborative contexts where there is power asymmetry between collaborating organisations.

A different approach in the IOR literature expands on the purposes of power by highlighting the impact of different dimensions of power on the issues addressed through collaboration, and the reasons why some issues move forward, and others are sidelined in the processes of collaboration (Crosby, 2010, Crosby and Bryson, 2005). This is explored further below.

2.5.4 Dimensions of power

Crosby and Bryson’s (Crosby and Bryson, 2005) concept of ‘shared power’ again draws attention to discursive power and meaning making, which is highlighted in Hardy and Phillips’ work (Hardy and Phillips, 1998b):

‘We see power as not just the ability to make and implement decisions (a traditional view) but also the ability to sanction conduct and, most importantly, to create and communicate shared meaning.’ (Crosby and Bryson, 2005)

In this account (see Figure 3 below), power operates across three dimensions: social, political and economic structures from which potential issues arise; ideas, rules, modes, media and methods, which influence the division of potential issues into those which are addressed and those which become non-issues; and observable human behaviour, where decisions are made.
In line with Giddens’ theory of structuration (Giddens, 1984), structures are here understood as ‘both the medium and the outcome of human action’ (Crosby and Bryson, 2005, p.405). In the third dimension of power, social, political and legal structures shape ‘felt needs, rights and responsibilities’ (ibid p.403), generating issues of public concern, which may potentially be addressed through inter-organisational collaboration. At the second dimension, ideas, modes, rules and methods (including ‘organisation’) act as ‘vehicles of bias’ (ibid p.403), determining which issues are addressed, and which become non-issues. The first dimension represents the observable level of power, that of human action and interaction, as seen in meetings and
working parties, in protocols, delivery contracts and resource allocation. It is this dimension which is frequently the focus of attention for collaboration participants, but the authors encourage those seeking to exercise influence to look beyond this:

‘...leaders can have their greatest influence over action and outcomes by focusing on the second dimension of power – that is, by strengthening, weakening, or altering the ideas, rules, modes, media, and methods that divide what is theoretically conceivable into what is actually possible and what is not.’ (ibid p.405)

Leaders should focus on the linking of social structures and human interaction through organisational and inter-organisational ideas, rules, modes, media and methods, and should seek to influence these mediating arrangements, seeking to create and communicate shared meaning. In this way, this model suggests that leaders with and without formal authority can make a difference, and make things happen.

2.5.5 Interim conclusions – leadership and power

This section of the literature review opened with a focus on the concept of shared power as central to inter-organisational collaboration. I have suggested that this approach may raise difficult questions for public sector dominated collaborations focused on complex social issues. However, the alternative approaches to power in collaborative contexts which are explored here suggest that it is possible to take a more pluralistic approach to the operation of power in collaboration. They suggest that power is multi-dimensional – observable and hidden, formal
and informal, authorized by the state, and enacted by participants through discourse and day to day interactions. This multi-layered approach to power in collaborative contexts draws attention towards the behaviour of individuals and the processes of collaboration at the micro level, and their interaction with the macro structural levels of collaboration. It also suggests that conflict and manipulation have a role to play, alongside cooperation, as participants actively manage micro points of power. Consequently, power is an important factor for those who seek to enact leadership in collaborative contexts.

In addition, the three dimension approach to power (Crosby and Bryson, 2005) suggests that leaders in collaboration can most usefully focus their attention on the second dimension (ideas, rules, modes, media and methods), between social structure and human action. In order to achieve shared meaning, impact on policy making, and manage conflict, leaders must exercise leadership which is visionary, political and ethical, and attentive to the policy process.

An approach to leadership as meaning making links closely to the concept of discursive legitimacy as a source of informal power in collaboration (Hardy and Phillips, 1998b), and to the opportunities for naming, framing and shaping, which form micro points of power which are potentially open to the influence of all partners (Huxham and Vangen, 2005, Ospina and Foldy, 2010). However, the focus on the significance of meaning making for leaders in the collaborative context also draws attention to the significance of the discursive power of policy, not simply in prioritising some issues more than others, but also framing leaders’ conceptualisation of their own transformational role (Newman, 2005).
2.6 Conclusion

In this review, I have drawn attention to the potential for and challenges of collaboration across sectors which aims to tackle the most complex social issues in an interconnected world. In response to my research questions, I focus on two key concepts in the practice of inter-organisational collaboration – leadership and power. The aim is to begin to explore the significance of these concepts for understanding the engagement in collaboration of individuals who act on behalf of voluntary and community sector organisations, and to uncover some of the challenges specific to participants from that sector. The picture which emerges is of an enormously complex role, in which the underlying tension between relating to the home organisation, to the wider sector (and its community), and to the collaboration itself adds to the complexity encountered by all who seek to lead in collaboration. Attending to external forms of power and formal authority leads to a view of VCO leaders as disempowered and divorced from decision-making in public sector led collaborations. However, the literature reviewed here suggests that more pluralistic multi-layered approaches to both concepts, which attend to micro practices, as well as structural relationships, offer a more optimistic perspective.

Returning to the growth in and frequently overlapping inter-organisational and cross-sectoral relationships highlighted at the opening of this review, there remains a question as to how leaders from different sectors make sense of their experience of the complex interplay of politics, policy and practice as they engage in cross-sector working. How do they position themselves, and what are the factors which contribute to that positioning? How do the
different discourses of collaboration play a role in their processes of sense-making? I will return to these questions in the discussion in Chapter 7 of the thesis.

In the chapter which follows I will explore the policy context in which the participants in this study enact leadership – the development of cross-sector partnership, government’s approach to the voluntary sector, and the dynamic relationship between the sectors.
Chapter 3

Context: the Voluntary Sector and the State

‘The making of a good society depends not on the State but on the citizens, acting individually or in free association with one another, acting on motives of various kinds – some selfish, others unselfish, some narrow and material, others inspired by love of man and love of God. The happiness or unhappiness of the society in which we live depends upon ourselves as citizens, not only the instruments of political power which we call the State.’

From: Beveridge’s ‘Voluntary Action’ (1948)
(cited in Prochaska, 2006, p.158)

3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins to explore the context in which leaders from voluntary and community organisations reach across the sector boundary to collaborate with their public sector colleagues. It focuses on the nature of the relationship between the voluntary sector and the state through an overview of government policy, but also by highlighting debates regarding the role of the voluntary sector in relation to the development and delivery of public services. This discussion reflects the contextualized nature of this study, and the dual focus of the research questions on the practice of leadership and on the context in which leadership is practiced. It also reflects an underlying assumption that sector differences are significant to the enactment
of leadership across sector boundaries. I will focus, therefore, on the presentation and positioning of the voluntary sector in government policy, exploring ideas and discourses about the distinctiveness, role and identity of the sector. Here I highlight the role of the state and of government policy in shaping that identity, but also draw attention to historical continuities which suggest that voluntary sector identity should not simply be defined in terms of the current public policy context.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is firstly to provide a broad review of the policy context over the period of the UK’s Labour and Coalition governments from 1997 to the present (2013), highlighting the state’s expectations of and relationship with the voluntary sector. A period of growth (in finances and activity) at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century signaled a potential new relationship of ‘partnership’ between the voluntary sector and the state, encapsulated in government’s Compact with the sector (Lewis, 2005, Zimmeck, 2010). However, austerity and public sector cuts since the recession of 2007, together with a change of government in 2010, and consequent policy changes, are again reconfiguring that relationship (Alcock, 2013, Alcock et al., 2012, Macmillan, 2011). Researchers suggest that the voluntary sector is currently undergoing a period of ‘unsettlement’, the significance of which is potentially greater than at any period since the advent of the welfare state (Alcock, 2013).

This review of policy has implications for understanding the distinctiveness of the voluntary sector. Research points to the permeability of sector boundaries and the development of hybrid organizations (Brandsen et al., 2005), and researchers increasingly draw on a concept of the sector as a discursive construction (Alcock, 2010b, Alcock et al., 2012, Macmillan, 2013), This is reflected in the different descriptors applied to the sector. These are frequently framed
in terms of what the sector is not – ‘not for profit’, ‘not public’, ‘not private’, and ‘third’ (Alcock, 2010b), as well as the more constructively framed, but narrower, ‘voluntary’ and ‘charitable’. However, I will argue that the lens of history reinforces a more positive view of the sector’s identity. I will consequently provide a brief overview of the historical context of the interdependence of state and voluntary sector in service development and delivery since the inception of children’s charities in the nineteenth century.

Returning to the contemporary context, this discussion of voluntary sector identity and distinctiveness highlights ongoing debates regarding the independence of VCOs, the impact of the marketisation of public services and consequent growth in commissioning, and the maintenance of sector ‘voice’. It points to the difficulty of maintaining a relationship of ‘partnership’ with public agencies, whilst at the same time both negotiating financial dependency, and advocating on behalf of communities – frequently with those same agencies.

The overview of policy in this chapter is not intended as a comprehensive literature review, but rather as an introduction to some of the key issues which arise from a focus on government policy on the voluntary sector, and the implications for the sector’s identity and relationship with the state. The discussion draws primarily on research which focuses on the development of the voluntary sector, including the work of the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC). While some of this work takes the form of peer reviewed journal papers, it is also published in working papers and policy reviews which contribute to the TSRC’s facilitation of an ongoing debate between academics, practitioners and policy makers as to the current and future identity and role of the voluntary sector. Other key think tanks and policy coalitions, such as the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), the National Children’s Bureau (NCB),

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and Children England, also engage in this debate about the role of the voluntary sector, its application in practice, and its role in children’s services, and their work is also referenced here. This ongoing debate suggests that voluntary sector identity is a dynamic concept, which provides a continually moving frame for the practice of leaders within the sector.

Throughout this chapter, I will draw attention to the significance of government policy on cross-sector collaboration on the children’s services context. However, this aspect of the discussion is indicative only. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the findings of analysis of key children’s services policy texts over the period 2003-2012. These findings draw a more detailed picture of the implications of policy in the children’s services context.

3.2 New Labour, new Compact

From its inception in 1997 to its loss of power in 2010, the UK’s Labour government introduced multiple inter-organisational and cross-sector collaborative arrangements, in an attempt to achieve joint working across services divided by structural and cultural differences (Babiak and Thibault, 2009, Bailey, 2003). The aims of this approach were to reduce duplication and inefficiencies, and deliver services which were experienced as ‘seamless’ by users. Some of the theoretical thinking behind this collaborative approach in the context of so-called ‘wicked’ social problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973) has been outlined in Chapter 2 above. In political terms, this approach signaled a new focus on the engagement and participation of communities, and of voluntary and community organisations, in the governance of the state and of localities, whilst continuing to draw on ideas about the marketisation and outsourcing
of state services which had developed under previous governments (Newman, 2001). These ideas were central to the Labour party’s description of itself as ‘new’, and its identification with the discourse of Third Way politics (Giddens, 1998). ‘New’ Labour policy suggested that public services could in future be delivered by organizations from any sector - public, private, or voluntary, and that voluntary organisations had a key role to play in achieving government’s social goals, not only as service providers, but also as contributors to a better understanding of social needs and of how to meet those needs (Lewis, 2005).

The government’s introduction of a ‘Compact’ (Home Office, 1998) between government and the voluntary sector marked a significant step in re-framing the cross-sector relationship. This has been described as,

‘an attempt to restructure a relationship that hitherto either had not been recognised as a relationship or, if it were, was regarded as a relationship of inequality’

(Zimmeck, 2010, p.125)

The Compact encapsulated an idea of ‘partnership’, which,

‘sighalled a new approach by government to voluntary organisations in their role as service provider and as mediating institutions’. (Lewis, 2005, p.122)

The text of the Compact reinforced both the independence of the sector and the significance of sector ‘voice’, the presentation of the views and interests of the community and of disadvantaged groups (Home Office, 1998). However, Zimmeck assesses implementation of
the Compact over a 10 year period as ‘desultory’ (Zimmeck, 2010, p.127), a lack of progress which she attributes to government’s failure to commit resources, demonstrate engagement and establish credibility. Lewis (2005) distinguishes between the Compact’s impact on service delivery, which she concludes was significant, and on engagement in and consequent impact on policy-shaping, which, she assesses, is less clear. She also identifies a tension between the Compact’s presentation of the role of the sector as service provider and its role as contributor to the renewal of civic processes and community participation, concluding that,

“Mainstreaming’ voluntary organisations such that they become equal partners, shaping the policy agenda as well as implementation, is not a likely prospect in the British welfare state.’ (Lewis, 2005, p.128).

Since 1998, the role of the voluntary sector in service delivery on behalf of the state has led to its increased financial dependence (Clifford et al., 2010). This has in turn threatened perceptions of the sector’s independence, with voluntary and community organisations presented by some commentators as agents of public policy (see for example Prochaska, 2006). In addition, researchers suggest there has been a blurring of sector boundaries, which began in the contract culture of the previous Conservative administrations of 1979-1997, but continued under Labour’s partnership and commissioning arrangements (Brandsen et al., 2005, Brandsen and van Hout, 2006, Lewis, 2005). The impression of sector ‘fuzziness’ (Brandsen et al., 2005) is reinforced in the Labour government’s change of terminology from ‘voluntary’ to ‘third’ sector\(^6\), which discursively divorced the sector from its historical roots in voluntarism.

\(^6\) For the sake of continuity, I use the term ‘voluntary sector’ throughout the text of the thesis. I choose this term as it appears to be the one to which actors within the sector return. Thus, despite changes in
Instead, this new descriptor created a link with ‘enterprise’, as it signaled the inclusion in the sector of social enterprises, a new organisational hybrid which drew on both voluntary sector and business models. Alcock describes the adoption of the term ‘third sector’ as the discursive creation of a new ‘strategic unity’ (Alcock, 2010b).

The Labour government’s promotion of cross-sector collaboration, as exemplified in the Compact, was played out in policy contexts focused on seemingly intractable social issues, including regeneration, poverty reduction, law and order, and the well-being of children and young people. Although attempts were made to link collaborations focused on different social issues at the local level through the creation of Local Strategic Partnerships, there remained a sense of overlap and duplication (Bailey, 2003). In the context of children’s services, a range of collaborative structures - at all levels from government to the local community - developed over the 13 year period of the Labour administration (Percy-Smith, 2005). At the local authority level, collaborative partnerships focused on safeguarding, early years’ provision, youth services, child poverty, extended services, parenting, family intervention and localities, as well as strategic development led by cross-sector Children’s Trusts (Allnock et al., 2006, Bachmann et al., 2009, Dudau, 2009, Horwath and Morrison, 2007, Horwath and Morrison, 2011, Milbourne et al., 2003). As a consequence, many voluntary sector leaders found themselves participating in a host of formal and informal collaborative arrangements, working groups, local, regional and national boards, whilst also delivering services under contract to those same partner public agencies - a position with considerable potential for conflicts of interest.

their mission statement, the leading sector coalition has continued to describe itself as the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, despite the changes in terminology discussed here.
With large funding streams allocated to children’s services via local authorities, parallel mechanisms developed for competitive tendering on the one hand and strategic planning on the other. Voluntary sector organisations found themselves competing for funding with ‘partners’ both from within the sector and across sector boundaries, partners with whom they also collaborated in partnership boards and working groups, on issues of needs identification and strategy development (Milbourne, 2009). Public sector led collaborative partnerships were encouraged to adopt shared priorities and targets, and to enact these through their separate organizations. Milbourne (2009) argues that this led to the obscuring of alternative voices and ideas:

> ‘If targets are achieved, problems apparently have solutions, can be managed and controlled. In this sense, characteristics of dominant managerial cultures....pervade community delivery, silencing challenges and failures, and negating alternative approaches.’ (Milbourne, 2009, p.289)

It is unclear whether Labour policies on cross-sector collaboration were driven by the acknowledgement of the need to work with the complexity of social problems and provision, or rooted in a managerial approach focused on the reduction of complexity for effective service delivery (Carmel and Harlock, 2008). However, this brief review suggests that the focus on service provision on behalf of the state has led to challenges for the purpose and voice of voluntary sector organisations, framed by policy on the one hand as ‘partners’ who make a strategic contribution, and on the other as deliverers of effective and efficient outsourced services.
Two policy themes of the UK’s Conservative/Liberal-Democrat Coalition government dominate current debates regarding the voluntary sector, and its relationship with the state. Firstly, the environment of budget cuts to reduce the national deficit has had significant implications for voluntary sector organisations at both national and local levels, with consequences for sustainability and even the survival of some (National Children’s Bureau, 2012). At the same time, the policy of ‘Big Society’ has highlighted the importance of voluntary and community organisations to the future of social wellbeing (Alcock, 2010a, Evans, 2011).

The following statement from government’s Cabinet Office appears in the context of a strategy for a new relationship between public and voluntary sectors issued shortly after the election:

‘Together with citizens and communities, the voluntary and community sector sits at the heart of the Government’s ambitions to create a Big Society. We recognize and value the special ability of voluntary and community organizations to mobilize and support people, particularly those who sometimes struggle to find a voice. We want to harness their power to find better solutions to our social problems. Our vision is for the sector, as a resilient and independent partner, to play an even more influential role in shaping a stronger sense of society and improving people’s lives.’ (Office for Civil Society, 2010, p.3)

The language is that of increased opportunity and influence, and the strategy goes on to predict an increase in voluntary sector service delivery to replace failed and expensive state
provision. This opening statement goes on to acknowledge, however, that government action to reduce the nation’s financial deficit will make the implementation of these policies ‘challenging’, as public sector spending is reduced.

A renewed Compact published by the Coalition government (Cabinet Office, 2010) focused on the outcomes of effective partnership between government and voluntary organizations, described in this document as ‘Civil Society Organisations’ (CSOs). This version of the Compact emphasizes the importance of the independence of CSOs, but also the need to open up markets for service provision. As identified in the previous government’s policy, there is some ambiguity with regard to CSOs’ contribution to needs analysis, strategy development, and consequently a more just (Big, or Civil?) society. It is also unclear whether the term ‘Civil Society Organisations’ suggests yet a further widening of the sector previously described as voluntary or third.

A report from the New Economics Foundation (nef) (Coote, 2010)), the left-leaning think-tank, argues that Big Society policy and public sector cuts are interdependent policies, which should be understood in the context of a continuing move towards the reduction of service provision by the state:

‘The ‘Big Society’ idea goes hand in hand with deep cuts in public spending. The cuts are only feasible alongside a strategy for shifting responsibility away from the state – to individuals, small groups, charities, philanthropists, local enterprise and big business.’ (Coote, 2010, p.2)
The report suggests, however, that the unintended consequence of policy may instead be to threaten the core identity and purpose of voluntary sector organisations, and reduce, rather than increase, voluntary engagement and consequently community capacity. It is perhaps unsurprising then that at the time of writing (June 2013), continued debates across practice and academia about the future of the sector, its independence and relationship with the state can be found across the internet, and feature prominently in workshops and conferences.

Over the first three years of the Coalition government (2010-13), the implications of these policies for children’s services policy has begun to emerge. In a review of the implications of Big Society policy for children’s services, Kathy Evans, Deputy Chief Executive of the National Children’s Bureau (a leading children’s services think tank), welcomed the profile and potential for the sector which Big Society policy implies (Evans, 2011). However, she questioned whether increased commissioning of services really implies a transfer of power to the sector, and highlighted the impact of cuts on service users, but also on the potential for volunteering.

In a later report, the National Children’s Bureau (2012) suggested that children’s voluntary organisations would be disproportionately affected by reductions in public expenditure, predicting that children’s charities will lose £406 million in public sector funding from 2011-2016, an 8.2 per cent reduction compared to 7.7 per cent elsewhere in the voluntary sector (ibid p.6). In response to initial cuts, VCOs reported reductions in staffing and service levels, and lack of capacity to engage in arrangements for cross-sector collaboration, at the very time when the government’s Big Society policy highlighted the need for an active, vibrant voluntary sector.

7 The website www.vssn.org.uk hosts a community of researchers and practitioners, and provides a useful way in to these debates.
Prior to the 2010 election, the Conservative Party had signaled its intention to remove the requirement for cross-sector Children’s Trust Boards to lead local planning and strategy of provision for children, young people and families. The implementation of this policy has led to increasingly diverse localized partnership arrangements, with some local authorities continuing these boards, some withdrawing them, whilst others have merged these arrangements with other local authority structures (see Chapter 4 for examples in data collection). This diversity reflects the coalition government’s policy on the dispersal of power to localities as evidenced in the Localism Act 2011. However, there is no suggestion that in the future public sector agencies will seek to solve complex social issues, such as the wellbeing of children, and delivery of services for children and families alone. Indeed, the discourse of Big Society suggests a wider ownership of social issues and potential solutions as a result of the cutting back of the state - to community organizations, the community and to individuals, each playing their role in maintaining society (Alcock, 2010a). Thus, it appears that while the context and form of collaborative relationships may change, working together across organizational and sector boundaries remains key to the implementation of social policy (Bunyan, 2013).

3.4 Sector distinctiveness and identity

At the heart of this thesis, and of the research questions, there is an assumption that it is possible to recognize a distinctive voluntary sector, which has a contribution to make to welfare strategy and provision, which is distinct from that made by the state and by public sector agencies. This is an assumption which I brought to the research from my own former
work experience in both sectors. However, the above discussion challenges the assumption of such a clear demarcation between sectors, as changing government policy describes the sectors and their relationship with each other in ways which reflect current political priorities, evidenced in the move from Labour’s discourse of ‘partnership’ to the Coalition’s ‘Big Society’. This raises questions as to whether the sector is indeed distinct, and, if so, in what ways. It is perhaps easy to conclude that the sector variously described as ‘voluntary’, ‘third’ and as ‘civil society’ is a reflection of government policy at any given time. In this section of the chapter, I will reflect on this somewhat negative view of the voluntary sector and point to a more positive view of sector identity, which is rooted in its history.

There is a sense in the TSRC discourse and that of other voluntary sector think tanks and coalitions that this is a time for the voluntary sector to review its purpose and role in relation to the provision of public services (Alcock, 2013, Davies and Evans, 2012). A recent report from a coalition of children’s voluntary sector organisations (Davies and Evans, 2012) suggests that the sector grasps the opportunity to lead a debate, which not only reflects again on the sector’s role and distinctiveness, but also on the effectiveness and future shape of services for children. Interestingly, this report emphasizes the economic contribution of the sector, as well as the potential for thinking differently about service delivery, perhaps indicating the extent to which the prevalence of the economic discourse has permeated the sector:

‘we believe that there is currently a vital window of opportunity to stimulate honest dialogue across the voluntary, private and public sectors, aimed at stimulating the kind of paradigm shifts in thinking about re-shaping the service sector for children, young people and families; about the distinct economic value of the voluntary and
community sector; and to discern those factors which genuinely constitute inevitable pressures at this time... Indeed this will be a potentially vital exercise in collectively focusing our human and financial resources where they can have a real impact.’ (ibid p.32)

Once again, this draws on an underlying assumption that working collaboratively, across organisational and sectoral boundaries, to develop shared understanding and a shared approach to the use of resources, is key to effective service development. However, in contrast to government emphasis on voluntary sector engagement with public policy, this report suggests the voluntary sector take ownership of the debate.

This vision of a voluntary sector which frames and leads the debate about the needs of children and families, and the configuration of services to meet those needs, can be placed in the context of an historical perspective on the relationship between the state and voluntary organisations, and the implications of that relationship for ideas about voluntary sector identity. The brief diversion into history which follows challenges the view of a one-way relationship in which the voluntary sector configures itself in response to the state, and presents instead a more dynamic picture of influence moving in both directions.

In an overview of the historical development of the voluntary sector, Harris (2010) suggests that the public and voluntary spheres were not completely separate through the 19th century, pointing to the significance of voluntary action as a key source of the state’s understanding of welfare provision; to examples of cross-funding from one sector to another – in both directions; of individuals working in both public bodies and voluntary projects; and to
government regulation of voluntary organisations. Two world wars and the intervening recession drew the two sectors into an increasingly complementary relationship, with voluntary organisations frequently supplementing state provision. The introduction of universal provision in the welfare state represented a deliberate move away from voluntary provision, but pressures on the state since the 1970s have led to increasing emphasis on the role of voluntary organisations in meeting community needs (Harris, 2010, Prochaska, 2006), as well as the increasing dependence of voluntary organizations on funding from public agencies. Prochasksa (2006) presents a picture of voluntary organizations throughout this 200 year period, not simply as filling holes in state provision, but rather as frequently pioneering in areas of need not yet recognized by the state.

The example of services for children suggests that, rather than simply being shaped by government policy, voluntary organizations have contributed to the shaping of state policy and of the practice of public services. Large children’s charities like Barnardo’s and Spurgeon’s may still bear the name of their 19th century child rescuing philanthropic founding fathers, but their development over 200 years from orphanage to community based and outreach provision has frequently led the development of policy and provision for children and families in need. The early development of services for children and families through nineteenth century philanthropy and ideas about child ‘rescue’, enacted through these and similar charities, played a crucial role in the development of society’s understanding of the state’s responsibilities towards children, and consequently of the state’s education and social services systems (Garrett, 2009, Holman, 2001, Prochaska, 2006, Shepherd, 2007).

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88 See the following websites for further information about the founding and history of these organizations: spurgeons.org/history; barnardos.org.uk.
This brief diversion into the historical relationship between state provision and voluntary organisations highlights the limitations of a view of the voluntary sector as one which develops entirely in response to public policy and to gaps in public sector provision, rather than with agency, as purposeful and value-based, engaged in deliberative social change.

However, the changing discourses of recent policy do challenge the view that these organisations are part of a clearly demarcated unitary sector, as exemplified by the changing terminology used to describe the sector – from voluntary sector to third sector, to civil (via Big) society, and back again to voluntary sector (Alcock, 2010a). Each of these descriptors changes the understanding of which organizations are included in the sector; each also reflects different social and political emphases. The term ‘voluntary sector’ has its own connotations of voluntarism and volunteering, which are echoed in (but not identical to) the emphasis on citizen engagement in the ‘Civil/Big Society’ discourse.

In contrast, the concept of the ‘third sector’, including social enterprises as well as more traditional voluntary and community groups, reflected an increasing emphasis on market principles. Alcock suggests that during the period 2000-2010 the use of the term ‘third sector’ created a ‘strategic unity’, behind which there lay significant diversity in organisational structure, accountability and purpose (Alcock, 2010b). This construct has been useful both for policy-makers and for those taking a ‘bottom-up’ approach to the development of community ‘voice’ to speak into policy:

‘The notion of a third sector in the UK in the 2000s is a product of its particular time and place and of the strategic interests of most of the major protagonists in creating
and sustaining it...A third sector has been constructed as what it is not, by policy discourses that distinguish it from the state and market and seek to promote the values that they associate with this. But it has also been constructed by discourses from within by those who wish to appeal to the shared strength that a distinctive sector can bring and from this to defend an ideological space that permits them to speak to government on behalf of a broad and indispensible constituency’ (Alcock, 2010b, p.21).

The organisations identified with, and identifying themselves with, the ‘third sector’ descriptor included new hybrids, which developed in response to simultaneous pressures from government policy, the market, and community needs (Brandsen et al., 2005). It is ‘a miscellaneous and fuzzy sector amidst communities, markets and the state...a sector of leftovers’ (ibid p.751). Brandsen et al (2005) describe an example of a small community group which takes on charitable status, then becomes a deliverer of services, and begins to compete with commercial enterprises for public contracts, with its structure and processes developing in parallel with these functions. They conclude that, rather than seeking a clearer delineation of the sector,

‘Boundary problems, fuzziness, and changeability may in fact be a defining characteristic of the third sector.’ (ibid p.750)

Brandsen and van Hout (2006) argue that models of co-management of services by public and voluntary organisations do not inevitably lead to loss of autonomy, but they do raise issues of organisational identity:
‘rejuvenating welfare state policies from the bottom-up, attempting to resolve major tensions at the stage of policy implementation. The flipside is that it engenders a constant struggle over the coherence and identity of the organization.’ (ibid p.541)

In this changing environment, there will be a need for people who are able and willing to work with uncertainty and ambiguity.

These studies suggest that the increasing complexity of relationships between public and voluntary sector leads to a parallel increased complexity within individual organisations, impacting on the purpose, form and processes of the voluntary organisation, but also on perceptions and expectations of the role and purpose of the wider sector. This provides a challenging context for voluntary sector leaders, as they manage independent purposeful organisations with a social mission, and at the same time engage in the complexities and ambiguities of cross-sector collaboration in policy driven contexts. Discussion of the sector’s distinctiveness and identity may at times appear as an exercise in semantics, but for these individuals it is an issue which is significant for practice.

This is not though to conclude that it is easy to identify the specific bases of claims for the sector’s distinctiveness. Instead, a picture emerges from this discussion of a sector which is dynamic, continually re-defined and re-defining itself. In a recent paper, Macmillan (2013) suggests that rather than focusing on what makes the sector special, it may be more significant to ask why ideas about distinctiveness matter to actors in and around the voluntary sector. This issue will re-emerge in the discussion in Chapter 7.
3.5 Conclusion: implications for cross-sector collaboration

This chapter has provided a brief overview of the overarching policy context in which cross-sector collaboration takes place. I have highlighted the ambiguities and inconsistencies of policy both within and between the periods of the Labour and Coalition governments in framing the voluntary sector variously as competitive service provider, a source of expertise and contributor at the strategic level, and a facilitator of community engagement. Political ideology (Third Way, role of the state), economic reality (boom and bust), and an understanding of society and societal needs, all contribute to the development of discourses around the voluntary sector and the contribution it can make in collaboration with the public sector. I have also argued that a historical perspective suggests that the voluntary sector impacts on the policy and practices of the state and public agencies, as well as being itself shaped by policy. In the process, I have shown a sector which is dynamic, with changing, porous, and ‘fuzzy’ boundaries.

Before moving on from this overview, I summarise below key issues which emerge from this discussion, which are of significance, not simply for reasons of policy, but rather for the practice of cross-sector collaboration. These issues suggest that sector distinctiveness and interdependence each have a role to play in issues of practice:

- Firstly, both Labour and Coalition policies lead to an emphasis on the opening up of public services to the market. In the current context of public sector cuts, driving
down costs through competition has become increasingly important for public agencies. As a consequence, there is a danger that services which are ‘voluntary’ may be equated with those which are cheap.

- Secondly, there is a consistent emphasis in policy on the joining up of services to ensure they are perceived by users as ‘seamless’ when delivered by different agencies and sectors. In children’s services, this emphasis has often been linked to and driven by significant failures, centred on tragic and widely publicised child deaths. This is a powerful and emotive driver towards service integration, but also has tended to instill a culture of avoidance and defensive practice (Parton, 2009).

- Thirdly, there is a sense, albeit not clearly defined, that voluntary organisations have something different to offer from state agencies in the way that services are delivered, as well as to the development of strategy, which is focused on a perception that VCOs have a different relationship with the community. This difference is embedded in the history of the sector, its links with voluntarism and community action.

- Fourthly, for voluntary organisations, a key incentive to collaborate with public agencies lies in dependency on state funding, with 52% of the income of children’s charities now provided by state sources (National Children's Bureau, 2012). This leads to difficult questions for those who lead such organisations – how can an organisation which perceives itself as distinctive from public agencies, which may even be in opposition to government policy, also play the role of ‘partner’, contributing to shared processes, and developing shared responsibility, whilst continuing to deliver services to meet government’s agenda (Craig et al., 2004)?
In Chapter 5, I will return to the topic of policy, to present an analysis of children’s services policy from the Labour and Coalition governments. I will present data from key policy documents, in order to explore in detail the policy discourses of cross-sector collaboration in the children’s services context, and of the voluntary sector, as agent of public policy, service deliverer, representative voice, exemplar of good practice, and contributor of alternative approaches and strategies. I will then go on to explore how empirical data collected from children’s services leaders and from partnership contexts can lead to insight into the experience and sensemaking of leaders in this complex and ambiguous context.
Chapter 4
Methodology

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I first provide an overview of the methodology, then move on to the detail of data collection and analysis, before commenting on the move from analysis to conceptualisation. The chapter is divided into four sections:

The first section (4.2) describes my research approach, focusing on the adoption of a qualitative research design to answer the research questions, and achieve the aims of the study. It highlights how the design has adapted, in response to the experience of engaging in empirical research in a fast moving policy environment, and introduces the concept of the researcher as bricoleur as a metaphor to describe the experience of research which is iterative, pluralistic, and which aims to explore, rather than reduce complexity. The use of multiple sources of data, and adoption of multiple analytical lenses, in order to explore and expose this complexity, is compared to the principles and practices of ethnography. This discussion highlights the dual aims of the research strategy to produce ‘thick description’, an account of situated practice, and to build theory from that account. The chapter describes the strategy for analysis to achieve these aims.

The second section of the chapter (4.3) describes the methods of data collection, introducing the different sources and types of data which were collected through interviews, observation,
and the collation of key policy documents. I provide an overview of interview participants, and
observation sites, and list policy documents selected for analysis.

In the third section of the chapter, I move on to outline the processes of data analysis,
describing the adoption of different analytical lenses. Thematic analysis, exploration of
metaphor, and policy analysis, each provide insight into the data, addressing the focus of the
research questions on both individuals and context. Throughout the processes of analysis,
writing played a key role in enabling, allowing me to ‘think out loud’ (Hammersley and
Atkinson, 2007), as I reflected on the data, and reconstructed narrative examples of practice.
Together, these different approaches to the data begin to reveal the complexity of the
experience of cross-sector collaboration.

The final section of the chapter provides a brief account of the ethical consent process,
together with reflection on some of the ethical issues which arose in the course of fieldwork
and writing.

4.2 Methodology and research approach

The aims of the project are firstly to uncover practice and sensemaking⁹, and secondly to
develop theory for practice. I adopt a qualitative methodology to address these aims and
answer the research questions:

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⁹ Here I use the term ‘sensemaking’ to mean ‘making sense of’ in a general way, rather than to convey a
specific theoretical approach.
How do third sector leaders practice (enact and make sense of) their leadership role in the context of cross-sector children’s services collaborative partnerships?

What is the impact of that context on their practice of leadership?

In order to address the dual focus of these questions on the individual and the context, the empirical research draws on multiple data sources, which I describe in detail in the second part of this chapter. Focusing on individuals, I explored the views of voluntary sector leaders through interviews, and observed collaborative practice. Turning to context, I gathered documents from local partnerships, but also analysed key policy documents which provide government guidance for the development and management of cross-sector partnership in children’s services.

This is not, however, an attempt to aggregate data from different sources to find the ‘truth’, or develop a ‘whole picture’, an attempt described by Silverman as ‘mistaken’ (Silverman, 2005, p.122). Instead, my intent is to develop ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of the practice of collaborating from the specific perspective of voluntary sector participants. ‘Thick description’ takes account not simply of human behaviour, but also of context, moving beyond the reproduction of words spoken and actions observed. It draws on interpretation and meaning, explicates complexity, and emphasises the pluralistic (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005a, p.17), while in contrast, a ‘thin description’ is an account of what happened without interpretation. The detail of context, significance of history, and account of social relationships are key to thick
description, enabling the reader to determine the credibility of the researcher’s interpretations (Ponterotto, 2006). The different elements of the thesis – individual experience, collaborative practice, sector history, policy, through analysis to findings and conceptualisation – these all contribute to the thick description of cross-sector collaboration. Drawing on multiple sources of data, approaching that data through multiple lenses, and writing about the data in different forms, I have sought to develop a description which is both ‘thick’, and credible to the reader. In section 4.2.5 I describe the processes of producing this thick description, and explore the limitations of this approach for the current research.

The second aim of the research is to develop theory which links together collaboration theory and voluntary sector studies in a way which is useful to practitioners. This aim derives from the motivation for the research, rooted in my experience as a practitioner within and across public and voluntary sectors, and in the desire to generate learning which can be shared with other practitioners. This is not to suggest that there are evidence-based ‘solutions’ to the practice of collaboration, waiting to be discovered. Instead, the aim is to identify ‘tools’ which are of use to ongoing practice, such as those described by Huxham and Vangen (2005), in the context of the theory of collaborative advantage, as ‘handles for reflective practice’. This aim informed data collection, processes of analysis and conceptualisation, and the discussion of findings. The strategy adopted to achieve this second aim is described in section 4.2.6. In the conclusion to the thesis (Chapter 9), I re-visit this second aim, and reflect on the extent to which it is achieved.
The research design is focused on achieving these aims, and addressing the research questions. It is an iterative design, in which I moved recursively between different stages of the project, as early analysis informed both initial interpretation and further data collection. I returned to the data texts to review and re-consider, compared findings from data sources and analytical approaches, and continued to read and re-read previous research, re-writing the literature review throughout the research process.

4.2.1 Epistemology

The research approach is interpretive (Bryman, 2008), and is informed by my understanding of the social world as something which is ‘real’ (exists independently), but can be known only in part. The individual experiences the social world through the mediation of human ideas, language and social structures, which are themselves continually developing. In addition, each individual’s perception of social relationships is coloured by factors such as economic status, and gender, but also by personal experiences and relationships, education, work experience, and political and religious commitments. For the researcher operating from within this understanding of the social world, each set of observations or interactions reveals something which is partial and limited: consequently greater insight is achieved by drawing on multiple sources of data and multiple perspectives (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008, p.63).

In addition, I understand social research as an attempt to make sense of the world (or at least a small part of it), which in turn impacts on that world: research interactions in the form of interview questions, attendance at meetings, and informal engagement impact on the object of the research. As I ask questions, make notes, send emails, record, write-up, I uncover the
object of the research, but equally, in my conversations, and my writing, I construct something which is different – a new perspective, a different understanding. I am an active participant, rather than an objective observer (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.17). There is a performative element to research (Law, 2003), which draws on my own identity and history, and which has a tendency towards reduction and singularity. Understanding the relationship between researcher and researched in these terms, encourages the researcher not to take data at face value, and to make her interpretations explicit (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In a later chapter (see Chapter 8), I will reflect on my impact on the research and the research participants, and its impact on me, but I note here that in adopting multiple analytical approaches to the data, I have attempted to challenge my own expectations and interpretations, aware that my perspective is always limited and partial.

4.2.2 Researcher as bricoleur

In adopting a research approach in which I attempt to present complexity, and resist the tendency towards singularity, I find it helpful to think in terms of the metaphor of the researcher as bricoleur or quilt maker, as described by Denzin and Lincoln (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005a, pp.4-7). The researcher as interpretive bricoleur produces a montage, which is developed through an emergent process of engagement with different tools and materials to produce a ‘pieced-together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex situation’ (ibid p.4). Like a quilt maker, the researcher brings together pieces with different provenance, history, and texture. She reflects on each individual piece, considers how these pieces might fit together, rejects some, starts to place pieces alongside each other, reviewing the developing pattern, moving and replacing the pieces - gradually the whole emerges. The
final product is unclear at the beginning of the project, and even at the end is clearly constructed of many parts, rather than a single whole – it does not pretend to be of a single piece, but instead is interesting and aesthetically pleasing precisely because of its plurality.

I find this metaphor for qualitative research useful for three reasons. Firstly, it reflects the adoption of multiple qualitative methods for data collection and analysis, to explore the multi-layered reality of collaboration in which individuals and multiple contexts continually interact with each other. Secondly, it reflects the interdisciplinarity of the research (Kincheloe, 2001), which draws on social policy, management and organisational theory, voluntary sector studies, and social work practice. Thirdly it conveys the messiness (Law, 2003) and non-linear nature of the research experience, as explored further below.

4.2.3 The research experience

In the course of the research, I adapted the design in response to national policies and local practices which changed continually throughout this period. These changes frequently appeared unclear, ambiguous, even at times contradictory. This reflects Law’s (2003) description of the research experience as ‘messy’ or ‘non-coherent’ (rather than incoherent), as the researcher continually adapts to changes which impact on access, challenges, unexpected opportunities, and emerging knowledge. Law argues that in such contexts the researcher must work with, rather than seek to obscure the messiness of the research experience:
'In practice research needs to be messy and heterogeneous. It needs to be messy and heterogeneous, because that is the way it, research, actually is. And also, and more importantly, it needs to be messy because that is the way the largest part of the world is. Messy, unknowable in a regular and routinised way.' (Law, 2003, p.6)

The metaphor of the researcher as bricoleur or quilt-maker reflects the experience of engaging in this research, as policies and structures changed, individuals moved on, job roles disappeared, and the ‘norms’ of cross-sector working which I had experienced in my working life were apparently undermined and dismantled, even as I sought to study them. The rapid pace of policy change, and consequently of practice in the voluntary sector and children’s services worlds, impacted on access to the field, but also continually shifted the field itself. An example of this is the focus of the original research proposal on voluntary sector representatives to Children’s Trust Boards. During the course of the research, the Coalition government removed guidance related to these boards; while some were dismantled, others continued, or subtly (and not so subtly) changed their form. As a consequence, I adapted the research design, in order to reflect changes in the policy and practice environment.

However, this is not to suggest that the need to adapt necessarily had a negative impact on the research. Rather I acknowledge how this re-focused my attention away from the engagement of individuals in specific policy driven entities, and towards individual practice and the continuing interaction between practice and policy. The final thesis is therefore in some ways different from that conceived at the proposal stage, but reflects the fluidity of the context in which the research took place.
4.2.4 Placing the methodological approach

The methodology introduced above has some similarities to ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Whilst I did not adopt the traditional ethnographic approach in which the researcher is immersed for a defined period of time in the research context, key elements of the methodology mirror Hammersley and Atkinson’s account of the key elements of ethnography (ibid pp.3-4, 161), as indicated below:

1. The research draws on data from a range of sources, observation, interviews, and analysis of written materials, described by Angrosino as the ‘judicious mix’ of ethnographic research (Angrosino, 2007).

2. I adopted an iterative approach which reflects the ‘unstructured’ (ibid p.3) and explorative nature of ethnographic research, which begins with a relatively open-ended interest in an aspect of social life, and develops into a more specific understanding and detailed questioning over the course of the project.

3. I spent time in participants’ context. As well as attendance at meetings for data collection, I visited workplaces, community venues and professional conferences during the research process. In addition, I continued to work on consultancy projects in children’s services during the early stages of the research, and continued to volunteer in youth and children’s projects in my local community.

4. The project did not begin with fixed interpretive categories. Instead, these emerged through the process of analysis.

5. The research focused on a small number of individuals and their settings, in order to facilitate in-depth study.
6. The processes of analysis involved interpretations of human actions and institutional practices, producing descriptions, explanations, and theories.

The study also has some similarities to practitioner research, due to my immersion in the context prior to and during the early stages of the research, and interest in practices and institutions which I have experienced myself (Murray and Lawrence, 2000, p.10). Rather than entering the field as an outsider, the practitioner ethnographer brings existing relationships and understanding of cultural practices and values to the study (Barton, 2008). However, my withdrawal from the context, as the research developed and I returned full-time to my researcher’s desk, allowed me to place distance between myself and the object(s) of research.

In summary, then, the methodology has similarities with ethnography, and with practitioner research, but there are also differences in terms of the relationship between researcher and the research context. I return to this topic in a later chapter on reflexivity (Chapter 8). The section below focuses on a major tool of ethnography – ‘thick description’.

4.2.5 Thick description

4.2.5.1 Introduction to thick description

My aims in the thesis are then firstly to produce an account of the practice of voluntary sector leaders in collaborative contexts, and secondly, from that account, to generate theory, which both contributes to the body of inter-organisational collaboration theory, and is useful to practitioners. To develop this account, I draw on what individuals do, and on what they say,
but also on three key aspects of the context in which individuals practice – the voluntary sector in which they work; the national policy context; and the local implementation of policy in inter-organisational meetings, working groups, and partnership bodies. The purpose is to identify what participants do which can be understood as ‘leading’ in the context of cross-sector collaboration; and to uncover how they make sense of their leadership role in this context, the meaning they attribute to practice and context, and the relationship between the two. To achieve this, I draw on data from interviews, observation, and policy analysis to provide an account of practice in cross-sector collaborative contexts.

This approach has similarities to ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973). The anthropologist Geertz adopted this term from the work of the philosopher Ryle, describing ethnography as an ‘elaborate venture in...“thick description”’ (Geertz, 1973, p.6). Patton asserts that ‘thick, rich description provides the foundation for qualitative analysis and reporting’ (Patton, 2002, p.437), taking the reader into the setting described, while Ponterotto describes thick description as ‘one of the most important concepts in the lexicon of qualitative researchers’ (Ponterotto, 2006, p.538). However, Ponterotto (ibid) is also amongst those who acknowledge that there is some confusion as to what the concept means and how it is applied in practice (see also Hammersley, 2008).

Below, I explore key elements of thick description, as represented in the research literature, before going on to outline the ways in which the research reported in this thesis can be understood in terms of this concept.
4.2.5.2 Defining thick description

‘Thick description’ at times appears to be equated with the inclusion of extensive, multi-dimensional detail. It provides ‘rich, detailed, and concrete descriptions of people and places’ (Patton, 2002). Some authors contrast this approach with ‘thin description’ which reports facts, and provides an account of what happened, without context or exploration of meaning (Denzin, 1989, Ponterotto, 2006). For Denzin, ‘full’ thick description includes elements of the biographical, the historical, the situational, relational, and interactional (Denzin 1989 p.91). This is not to suggest that every example of thick description will focus equally on each of these elements, but in all, the researcher provides an account of events which draws on multiple sources, including personal stories, interviews, and slices of social interaction. However, the purpose is not simply to provide a very detailed account, but rather to begin to understand research participants’ interpretations of the social world (Marshall and Rossman, 2011); to attempt ‘to rescue and secure the meaning, actions, and feeling that are present in an interactional experience...’ (ibid p.101). Thick description draws the reader into the world which is being described (Patton, 2002), providing the reader with a sense of participants’ lived experience or ‘verisimilitude’ (Denzin, 1989, Greenblatt, 1997), which the researcher conveys by drawing on multiple data sources, but also by privileging the voice of the participant. This aspect of the thick description concept suggests that the researcher’s goal is primarily to convey the participant’s perspective, whilst acting as a reminder that the researcher’s account must provide sufficient detail and participant voice to enable the reader to judge whether her interpretations of the data are credible (Greenblatt, 1997).
The concept of thick description thus draws attention to meaning-making, not simply at the level of participants’ conscious intentions, but rather at multiple levels. Description which is ‘thick’ provides a detailed account both of actions and of the context in which actions take place, drawing attention to the relationship between social action, context, and meaning (Ponterotto, 2006). Ryle’s original use of the term (Ryle, 1968) focused on the intentional meaning attributed by an individual social actor to his actions. More recent definitions of the term draw attention to the researcher’s production of an interpretive account which draws attention both to the meaning-making of participants situated in a specific context, and to the researcher’s meaning-making as she constructs that account (Denzin, 1989, Denzin and Lincoln, 2005a, Ponterotto, 2006). Rather than providing a linear account of what a participant did, together with an explanation of what the participant meant, the researcher acknowledges that she is producing an interpretive account which explicates complexity, and emphasises the pluralistic (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005b).

The understanding of thick description as an account which exposes layers of meaning-making in the qualitative research process highlights the researcher’s role in actively crafting the text which is the product of research. The process of writing thick description highlights the multiple levels of spoken and written text from which the researcher constitutes this representation - the text spoken by interviewees; the text created by the researcher as a record of interviews and observations; the selection of data and presentation of findings in the finished research text (Greenblatt, 1997).

In practice, researchers have applied the concept of ‘thick description’ as a tool of ethnographic research in somewhat different ways (Hammersley, 2008, Ponterotto, 2006).
Hammersley (2008) suggests that there is a lack of clarity in Geertz’s own account, and specifically little guidance on how researchers should go about producing thick description. Ponterotto (2006) suggests this has become more confused as the concept has been applied to a wider range of qualitative methods beyond that of participant observation, as originally applied by Geertz (1973). To apply the principles of thick description to interview based studies, Ponterotto (2006) advises researchers to pay attention to providing sufficient detail of participants and settings to enable the reader to understand the results of the study; and to ensure that the presentation of findings promotes participant voice. In addition, the discussion of the research findings should merge participants’ lived experiences with researcher interpretations, in a way which surfaces, rather than obscuring, the researcher’s meaning-making, and allows the reader to consider whether she would reach the same interpretative conclusions. This focus on interpretation and meaning-making indicates that thick description draws the reader’s attention beyond the ‘what’ of a thin descriptive account to the where, how, and why, and consequently towards the conceptual and theoretical structures which underlie social action (Denzin, 1989).

In the field of organisational studies, ethnographers have used the tool of thick description to provide accounts of organisational life which focus on what people do, their discursive strategies, and the context in which they work, which have in turn led to theorising about how organisations work, and how individuals interact in and with those organisations (Bechky, 2006). In an example which has become an ethnography classic, Orr (1996), provides an account of the work of photocopier technicians at Xerox, which demonstrates the gap between corporate assumptions and day to day work practice, ‘in an occupational community within which technicians share territories, machines, customers, and stories’ (Bechky, 2006, p.1758).
Orr (1996) argues that this ethnographic approach is particularly appropriate for the study of work practice, in which context and practice are inextricably related. Bechky (2006) in turn argues that the success of Orr’s study indicates that researchers should apply thick description to other work contexts to find out what workers do, but also because this approach leads to theorising. Thick description captures and interprets social discourse; it pulls the reader into the work life of others; and consequently it stimulates theorising about work and organisations. Thus, Orr’s thick description of the work of photocopier technicians has contributed to the building of theory about how people learn and share knowledge in organisations and ‘the influence of situated work practice on occupational and organizational communities’ (ibid p.1758).

This brief account of the concept of thick description has highlighted several elements of this approach which I adopt in this research. Below I focus on these elements, and their significance to the methodology and production of the thesis. I then go on to describe how issues of access, confidentiality, and change have limited the aim to achieve thick description.

4.2.5.3 Use of thick description in the thesis

Following Denzin’s account of the features of thick description (Denzin, 1989, p.33), my aims are to relate participants’ actions (and discourse) to context; to trace the evolution and development of actions; explore the meanings behind actions; and present participants’ actions and words in textual forms which enable the reader to make her own interpretations. I draw on history, context, and social interaction, as well as the words of participants, and of policy texts to achieve these aims.
At the most basic level, I draw on multiple sources of data to provide a ‘thick’ account of practice in cross-sector collaboration, which describes not only what participants do and say, but also the context in which they act. The focus is on the specific – here the specific of collaborative practice at a specific time in the history of children’s services. This approach in turn enables me to explore the relationship between actions, discourse, and context, and to address key underlying questions, including the impact of location in the voluntary sector on leadership practice; and the relationship between collaborative practice and the policy context.

Secondly, I follow the principle of thick description to provide detail both of the objects of the research (participants and context) and of the process, so that the reader can determine for herself whether the meanings attributed to participants’ words and actions, and the conclusions drawn from the data, are reasonable and persuasive. This detail includes quotations from interviewees, but also narrative vignettes (‘examples of collaborative practice’), which, following the advice of Denzin (1989), provide further detail of the immediate context, and of the flow of social interaction. These vignettes both describe social interaction, and draw attention to layers of meaning present in such interactions – the surface actions and words, and the hidden meanings which emerge in the flow of interaction.

Creswell suggests that ethnographers use such vignettes as cases or examples, rhetorical devices ‘that form a part but stand for the whole’ (Creswell, 1998, p.184). I do not to suggest, as do some authors, that the reader is somehow drawn in to experience the world of voluntary sector collaborators for herself, but rather that the reader is given sufficient detail of that world to determine the credibility of the meaning attributed to participants’ actions in a specific context, and to assess the findings of the study.
Thirdly, in writing up the thesis, my aim is to surface, rather than obscure, the layers of meaning making which underlie the construction of a completed report. Hence, I have chosen to present separate chapters which address different elements of the interpretive process – historical background, content analysis of policy, thematic analysis of interviews and observations, and textual analysis through examination of participants’ use of metaphor. Rather than providing a single description of practice, I thus provide different lenses through which participants’ world, actions, and words can be interpreted. Together, these different chapters add up to a description which is ‘thick’, rich, and complex, and which leads to theorising about leadership practice which is situated in the voluntary sector, but reaches across sector boundaries.

4.2.5.4 Limitations

However, the dual aims to produce thick description, and to generate theory from that description, are only achieved in part in this thesis. This is at least partly due to issues of access, and related concerns regarding confidentiality, in a context of social and policy change.

Firstly, some aspects of detail are missing from the account presented in the thesis – details of location, actions, and of individual participants. These details were collated in research notes, but are not reproduced in the thesis, in order to protect anonymity, and to honour requests not to directly quote from some meetings attended – particularly in the context of difficult decision making processes and influencing around public sector cuts. Thus, Table 4 below provides a brief introduction to participants, but many of the details of background and role
have been omitted to protect individuals’ identity. Similarly, some details of meetings have been removed from the narrative ‘Examples of practice’. This is a dilemma for the qualitative researcher who is attempting to provide the reader with sufficient detail to follow and assess the layers of meaning making within the research for herself, but is also committed to ethics of confidentiality and anonymity. This dilemma is explored further in a discussion of the ethical issues arising during this project (see section 4.5).

Secondly, there are gaps in the account of cross-sector collaboration presented in this thesis due to difficulties in gaining access to certain key contexts – specifically to cross-sector meetings and working groups. Elsewhere in the thesis, I describe how partnerships and cross-sector meetings I wanted to observe ended in the early stages of the research, due to changes in policy and a change of government. In chapter 6, I indicate that I realised that much of the work of collaborating was taking place in less formal meetings, which were mentioned to me in retrospect by interviewees. With hindsight, and a greater awareness of the politics of the context, and the move away from formalised partnership meetings, a different route to access data would have been helpful – a period of time observing one or more participants in the workplace. However, the process of negotiating access has itself contributed to the thick description generated by the research, highlighting the relationship between the formal, and easily observed, entities and practices of collaboration and the informal, hidden practices. This highlights the importance of surfacing such challenges in qualitative research.
4.2.5.5 Interim Conclusion – thick description

The different elements of the research – individual experience, collaborative practice, sector history, policy, through analysis to findings and conceptualisation – these all contribute to the thick description of cross-sector collaboration provided by the final written account of the thesis. Drawing on multiple sources of data, approaching that data through multiple lenses, and writing about the data in different forms, I have sought to develop a description which is ‘thick’, and credible to the reader, but also which exposes the processes of interpretation and meaning making which are central to qualitative research.

In these ways, I attempt to apply the principles of thick description. However, this aim is achieved only in part for reasons related to issues of access and of ethics. As described elsewhere in the thesis, the study took place in a policy context of an increasing focus on austerity, the implementation of public sector cuts, and consequent impact on the funding of VCOs, and an increasing sense of the vulnerability of the sector, and of individuals within the sector. As a consequence, some participants specifically requested that I remove details from any written account, I was asked not to quote directly from some meetings observed, and, on one specific occasion, directly asked to put down my pen. These issues limit the possibility of providing details which convey the world of voluntary sector collaboration to the reader. At the same time, recording these concerns around confidentiality conveys something of the experience of vulnerability and anxiety which was expressed by research participants, in the context of austerity and public sector cuts in which the research took place, thus adding to the insight into this world.
In summary, this study builds up a ‘thick description’ of the work of collaborating through the interwoven foci on individuals, social action, and the context of local collaborative processes, history, and national policy, and the exploration of the relationship between social action and context. This is not to suggest that the product of the research is a linear detailed descriptive narrative account, but rather that the purpose of the different elements of the study is to provide a multi-faceted account of collaboration. This account is both localised and specific to the context of voluntary sector collaboration with public agencies in children’s services, and points towards potential wider applications. The latter relates to the second aim of the research, which is to develop theory which links together collaboration theory and voluntary sector studies in a way which is useful to practitioners.

4.2.6 Strategy for analysis

In this section of the chapter, I discuss the strategy for moving from data collection, through analysis, to theory building. In this study, the application of the tools of data analysis (described later in this chapter, section 4.3) serves two purposes. The first purpose is to present an authentic and evocative account of collaborative practice within a specific context. The second purpose is to develop concepts out of that account, which provide insight into that situated practice, but which may also provide insight into other related contexts. This second purpose is achieved through an inductive process which draws concepts from the data, in order to build theory.

The first of these purposes relates to the above discussion of the intent to produce ‘thick description’ - providing the reader with an account of practice and context which is credible
and evocative, and drawing on multiple data sources. The tools of analysis described later in this chapter contribute to this account:

- Thematic analysis identifies patterns across the practice of individuals;
- Narrative vignettes provide windows on individual behaviour, and on interactions between individuals;
- Exploration of participants’ language (through their use of metaphor) highlights how they discursively present their experience of collaborative practice.
- The results of policy analysis sit alongside findings from analysis of interview and observation data, juxtaposing the content and language of policy with the discourse and actions of participants.

Patterns, similarities, differences, and the unexpected all emerge from this continued engagement with data from different sources, and a picture of collaborative practice emerges.

The second purpose then is to begin to develop more abstract concepts from this situated account of collaborative practice in the context of voluntary sector engagement in children’s services, which may be applicable to practice in wider collaborative contexts. The aim of this theory building approach is to generate theory which firstly illuminates the data, then provides insight into collaborative practice more widely, but which also provides ‘handles for reflective practice’ (Huxham and Beech, 2003, Huxham and Vangen, 2005). My approach here draws on an understanding of theory as ideas which help to ‘make sense’ of the social world (Weick, 2005). This sensemaking approach suggests that theory is not necessarily finished and complete; theory is ‘approximate’, a process of theorising, rather than a finished product.
(Weick, 2005). The approach to theory outlined here is then a ‘modest’ one (O’Reilly, 2009): it rests on an acknowledgement that theory is generated through processes of interpretation and translation of (frequently partial) data (O’Reilly, 2009). The concepts introduced in the later chapters of the thesis are thus offered as ‘emergent’ and for exploration through further research.

In the context of management studies, there is an understanding that theory should be useful for practice (Van de Ven, 1989). In this study, the intent is to build theory which ‘makes sense’ as a descriptor of collaborative practice, but which also provides ‘conceptual handles’ for reflective practice, as described by Huxham and Vangen (2005). These ‘handles’ provide ‘conceptual labels’ which help managers to understand and reflect on practice (ibid p.30). Managers are framed as users of theory (Huxham and Beech, 2003), and ‘conceptual handles’ enable theory users to pause the complexities of everyday life, to reflect, and to learn (ibid). The emergent concepts explored in the discussion chapter are intended for use by practitioners, whilst extending collaboration theory.

The ‘modest’ theoretical account of collaborative practice provided in this thesis began with the categorisation of the data through thematic analysis, generating emergent ideas which were brought back to that data in continuing processes of iteration. The move from unstructured data to emergent concepts was further facilitated through categorisation via participants’ language (specifically metaphor), and the application of qualitative content analysis to categorise the discourse of policy, as described in detail below. Continuing processes of comparison and ‘sifting’, provided illumination and insight, revealing patterns, but also shaping and re-shaping the research project (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Although
the application of these tools of analysis to generate ideas (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996) was
informed by initial reading, as well as by questions brought from my experience of practice, no
attempt was made to impose categorisation through frameworks derived from extant theory.
As I engaged repeatedly with the data, the initial categorisation and ideas generated from that
categorisation were continually refined, generating more abstract concepts. This process of
moving towards the abstract and conceptual was one of continued comparison - between
analytical ideas and the data; between one category or idea and another; and between insights
generated by the application of different analytical tools. This iterative process has similarities
with ‘grounded theory’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), when applied as a strategy, rather than as a
set of rules (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

The inductive approach to theory building adopted here draws on an interest, similar to that of
the more traditional ethnographer, in producing an account of the local and the situated, but
also in thinking about how insights gained into the local might provide insight into other
contexts (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). There are also similarities to the generation of
theory from the specific and situated accounts provided through case studies (Eisenhardt,
1989, Mitchell, 1983, Stake, 2005, Yin, 2003)\(^\text{10}\). From her in-depth engagement in and
knowledge of the case, the researcher assists the reader to think through its meaning in other
related cases (Stake, 2005). Attention to the detail of processes in a specific context uncovers
the circumstances in which those processes and associated behaviours may recur (Hartley,
2004). The aim here is to generate concepts from the specific which may be applicable in
other contexts, without producing conclusions which over-generalise, or make sweeping

\(^{10}\) Yin (2003 p.32-3) argues that the process of generalising from a case study, which he describes as
‘analytic generalization’, should proceed through use of existing theory as a template which allows the
researcher to assess the extent to which the current study replicates that theory. This is not the
approach used in the current study, where emergent theory is generated from the data.
claims. The basis of the extrapolation from the specific and situated to more abstract generalisation is one of ‘logical inference’ (Mitchell, 1983, p.200). This is similar to Patton’s account of logical generalisation from ‘information-rich’ cases (Patton, 2002, p.236). It is logically likely that features present in this study will relate to a wider population which is in some key ways similar to the participant group. The principle of generalisation adopted here is one of ‘proximal similarity’ (Patton, 2002, p.581), rather than any claim that the sample is in some way representative.

Below, I exemplify this process of moving through the stages of analysis to more abstract concepts by providing an account of the development of one concept introduced later in the discussion chapter. This example shows the surfacing of patterns in individual collaborative practice, then beginning to think about whether those patterns apply across other individuals in the study, and then again about whether they might provide illumination into practice in wider collaborative contexts. As suggested by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), there are some tensions in the process of applying the tools of analysis in this way, in order to gain insight into individual situated practice, but also to identify and categorise patterns with a wider application. However, continued iteration between the specific and emergent categorisation is a key part of the process of analysing qualitative data with a view to generating concepts which not only provide insight into that data, but which may also illuminate other related areas of social life.

The worked example provided here outlines how the application of the tools of analysis generates the emergent concept of ‘collaborative disruption’ which is introduced in Chapter 7.
Conceptualising ‘collaborative disruption’

Following thematic analysis, I returned to the data to develop narrative vignettes which provide accounts of situated collaborative practice. Developing such an account around my observation of one individual, Florence (see Box 10, section 6.2.5 for this account), drew my attention to the speed with which she moved in one meeting between a ‘collaborative’ approach (welcoming, facilitative, and warm in tone) towards public sector colleagues to an approach which was much more adversarial. Florence’s intervention into the meeting challenged the narration offered by the previous speaker that all was well and proceeding without problems. It disrupted the flow of the meeting, changing its tone and content, and appearing to introduce an atmosphere of tension which had not previously been evident to me as an observer. Following this intervention, Florence quickly returned to words and tone which again suggested a collaborative approach.

At the level of the individual and specific, this exemplifies Florence’s personal skills in negotiation. However, as I reflected on this in the process of producing further narratives of practice, I was reminded of the practice of another participant, who I observed in a different meeting. This meeting was a public agency led meeting, dominated by the engagement of individuals from that agency. Reviewing the notes from my observation of this second meeting, I noticed a discursive strategy which recurred in this individual’s practice. Firstly, she would welcome a report or contribution to the meeting, as if positioning herself as collegiate and collaborative, then she would quickly move on to suggest that the report or contribution was in fact fundamentally flawed and she was opposed to it. As I observed her repeat this behaviour several times during the meeting, I wondered if it was a deliberate tactic on her part. There was some similarity here with Florence’s behaviour, in terms of the speedy move between discourse and behaviour which emphasised the collaborative, to that which disrupted the dominant narrative, and the otherwise collegiate tone and flow of the meeting.

I then turned to the thematic indexing of the data, which I had previously generated, to explore whether there was evidence of this move between an approach which appeared ‘collaborative’ in style followed (not necessarily immediately) by an approach which was disruptive elsewhere in the data – specifically in participants’ self-reporting in interviews. I followed through index terms I had produced earlier through thematic analysis, looking again at data indexed by terms like ‘challenge’ and ‘protest’. This led me back to the primary data of the interview texts, but also on to further narrative vignettes describing other examples of practice which exemplified and affirmed the ‘collaborative disruption’ concept.

The emergent concept of ‘collaborative disruption’ does not suggest that all participants in this study engage in identical tactics of ‘collaborative disruption’, but rather draws attention to disruption as an integral part of their collaborative practice. At this point in the analysis process, I returned to the literature, and reflected on how this emerging concept is similar to and different from the concept of collaborative thuggery (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a). This highlighted the significance of the individual’s position within the immediate collaborative context – that of participant with apparently little access to power, in a context dominated by public agencies.

Box 1: Conceptualising ‘collaborative disruption’
The worked example offered here exemplifies the processes adopted in moving through the stages and different tools of data analysis in an iterative way, moving from a focus on the concrete to the conceptual, and from the individual to the participant group. Logical inference (Mitchell, 1983) suggests that what has been firstly observed in the individual account, then recognised as a pattern in the practice of participants in the study, may also be relevant to other actors in collaborative contexts which share certain key features. It is logically likely that concepts recognised through analysis here will then be recognisable in the practice of voluntary sector actors collaborating with public agencies on other complex social issues. More broadly, it is likely that key concepts are generalisable to actors who act without formal authority, attempting to influence dominant partners, in collaborative contexts where there is an asymmetry of power. However, these key concepts must be explored further through future research in order to confirm this wider application. As the intent is to build theory which is useful to practitioners, emergent generalisations will be reviewed and revised through research which engages with those practitioners (Greenwood and Levin, 2005).

This worked example of moving from the individual, situated, and concrete to the conceptual uncovers the strategy adopted in this study to theory development, and consequently to generalisation. As suggested above, the approach taken to generalisation here has some similarities to ethnography in that it draws theoretical concepts from an account of situated practice. It also has some similarities to the process of generalising from case studies, where the aim is to build theory from accounts which are specific and situated (Mitchell, 1983). The conceptualisations explored in Chapter 7 are offered as emergent ideas which contribute to collaboration theory, and may be useful to practice, as they are explored further through engaged research.
4.2.7 Metaphor

In this section, I discuss the use of metaphor in the thesis. Metaphor is employed in two distinct ways. Firstly, metaphor is employed at the conceptualisation stage as a mechanism of explanation and theory building. In the presentation of findings, and in the discussion chapter which follows, metaphor acts as a device which conveys something of the richness, ambiguity, and complexity of collaboration practice, and of the experience of collaborating. Secondly, exploration of interviewees’ use of metaphor forms part of the data analysis phase, taking its place alongside other analytical lenses. Specifically, interviewees’ metaphors are analysed as a method of uncovering layers of meaning in their discourse, and gaining insight into the sense they make of the experience of collaboration, alongside other lenses of data analysis. The latter is described in detail in the discussion of the processes of analysis in section 4.4.3. This section, therefore, focuses primarily on the former use of metaphor in the text.

At the most basic level, metaphor is an ‘illustrative device’ (Brown, 1976, p.170), which uses a term from one (usually familiar) frame of reference, and applies it within another frame of reference. By means of comparison with the concrete and known, metaphors ‘transform and illuminate’, making the familiar strange and the strange familiar (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.198). Metaphor reveals and uncovers particular aspects of meaning, as in Goffman’s use of metaphors drawn from drama and the theatre (Manning, 1992), but may also closes down and obscure others (Brown, 1976, Lopez, 2003). ‘Conceiving one thing in terms of
another’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p.36), metaphor increases understanding, through the creation of a ‘cognitive bridge’ between different domains (Putnam and Boys, 2006, p.542).

Metaphor is also though a building block of conceptual models or theory – ‘indeed, a model may be thought of as a metaphor whose implications have been spelled out’ (Brown, 1976, p.170). It acts as initial ‘scaffolding’ (Goffman, 1990/1959), a framework on which further analysis can be built. There is a continuity between metaphorical thought and the processes of conceptualisation - linking, juxtaposing, exploring the unfamiliar through the familiar and vice versa (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Consequently, use of metaphor as an explanatory device contributes to theory building (Clarke et al., 2014).

Visual metaphor is frequently deployed in social theory, mediating the account of the world offered by theory, and opening up particular aspects of that world (Lopez, 2003). Social theory has been described as ‘a language-borne practice’ (Lopez, 2003, p.3), in which metaphor enables the transfer of insight and associations from one system to another (Brown, 1976). In their account of the work of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, Jacobsen and Marshman (2008) show how the use of the literary device of metaphor can provide insight into the organisation of society. Bauman’s metaphor of the ‘liquidity’ of contemporary society conveys a world which is fluid, dynamic, and uncertain, in which nothing remains fixed. Metaphors used in this way provoke the imagination; they give insight into different contexts; they are not so much descriptions of an objective social reality, as a way of conveying something of the human experience.
In organisation studies, metaphor has been used to convey understanding of different types of organisations and the ways in which they function (Morgan, 1986, 1997). Morgan’s metaphors of organisations as, for example, machine and organism provide the reader with conceptualisations which increase understanding of organisational life. Describing a particular organisation in terms of its similarity to a machine tells us something about its processes, but also suggests that working in that organisation is likely to be an experience of efficiency, rather than of the organic and developmental. Less positively, metaphor can become embedded in the discourse of organisational life, so that its assumptions are rarely examined, as in the example of organisational ‘growth’ (Clarke et al., 2014). This metaphor from biology has become so embedded in organisational discourse that scholars rarely pause to ask whether it is always an appropriate image, or how its perpetuation impacts on expectations of organisations (ibid). Metaphor can also be seen as a tool for the improvement of organisational functioning (Inns, 2002), appearing in the consultant’s toolkit as a mechanism of analysis and advice. When used in this way, metaphor potentially has the effect of changing organisational processes, rather than simply describing them.

In this study, metaphors of ‘weaving’ and ‘fabric’ are adopted in the discussion chapter as devices of explanation and theory building. They are offered as ways of capturing something of the practice of inter-organisational cross-sector collaboration, conveying the continual interlinking of different elements of context and practice to create an environment which is the product of micro-practices. They point towards the complexity of the woven environment, its richness and colour, and also to the potential for changing the weave. This is not intended as an exact representation of collaborating, but instead invites the reader to engage with potential layers of meaning. Similarly, the presentation of research findings in Chapter 6 make
use of the metaphors of ‘backstage’ and ‘frontstage’, reflecting Goffman’s use of the metaphor of theatre (Goffman, 1990/1959). At one level, these terms simply describe location - whether a discussion took place in a public or private meeting - but at another level these metaphors invite the reader to consider the presence of performativity in the work of collaborating.

The use of metaphor as a device of explanation and conceptualisation in this study is not then intended to reveal a singular ‘truth’ about collaboration, but rather to stimulate the imagination, and contribute to ‘ongoing dialogue’ (Jacobsen and Marshman, 2008, p.802) about collaborative practice. An example from the collaboration literature is Vangen and Huxham’s account of the enactment of leadership in collaboration as including the behaviour of ‘thuggery’ (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a). This use of somewhat unexpected figurative language provokes the reader to ask questions.

This intent to stimulate questions is also true of the second use of metaphor in this study – as a lens for data analysis. The process of this second use of metaphor is outlined in detail later in this chapter (section 4.4.3). Metaphor here provides an alternative route into the data, focusing attention on participants’ use of language (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), and the insight which this conveys into ways in which they make sense of the experience of collaboration. Attending to participants’ language tells us something about the social phenomena they refer to, but also something about their discursive strategies of meaning making (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Metaphor in discourse reveals something about the individual, their understanding of the world, and understanding of themselves (Lakoff and Turner, 1989).
It is important to acknowledge though that, as a device of qualitative research, metaphor has limitations. The reflective researcher must continually test each figure of speech against the data, with an awareness of these limitations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Through the mechanism of comparison, metaphor uncovers meaning, but it can also conceal (Putnam and Boys, 2006). By highlighting similarities, the use of metaphor may obscure difference and elide the ambiguities of language (Inns, 2002). Metaphor can mislead, as well as providing unexpected insight (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The ubiquitous use of the metaphor of growth in organisation studies (Clarke et al., 2014), discussed earlier in this section, exemplifies this potential to close down meaning. In capturing one aspect of the social world, with the aim of increasing understanding, metaphor may also tend towards reduction of meaning (Inns, 2002, Nerlich, 2007). It may have the effect of pointing the reader towards the author’s preferred interpretation, rather than towards the possible multiplicity of interpretations. This preferred interpretation may then shape the reader’s expectations, with the consequence that metaphors become prescriptive, rather than descriptive (Inns, 2002). For example, the work of Brigitte Nerlich shows how metaphor used by the media, but also by scientific experts, during the UK’s foot and mouth crisis shaped public understanding, but also conveyed a sense of what the responses to that crisis ‘ought’ to be (Nerlich, 2007).

This normative tendency is certainly not the intent behind the use of metaphor in the current study. The metaphor of fabric, for example, is offered with the intent of inviting the reader to ask questions, as a step towards theory development, rather than in any essentialist sense of what is or ought to be. As a tool of data analysis, a focus on metaphor is employed as only one analytical lens, each bringing a measure of insight into the practice of collaboration. Metaphor
is offered as one tool amongst others for ‘imaginization’, creative thinking, and seeing situations from different perspectives (Inns, 2002, Morgan, 1997).

4.2.8 Conclusion - methodology

I have explored key elements of the research methodology here – the similarities to ethnography; the use of thick description, and the intent to build theory from thick description. I have described the strategy for working from data collection through analysis to generate both thick description and emergent theory, and explored the role which metaphor plays in the study. These key elements reveal the approach to the research, the inherent tensions in the study, and some of its limitations.

Below, I describe in detail the data sources and processes of data collection.

4.3 Data collection

This research draws, then, on multiple sources of data in order to uncover individual practice in a specific social, political and historical context. The focus is on the individual voluntary

11 A different, and equally important, study might have focused on voluntary sector organisations as the unit of analysis, exploring organisational issues which arise in the context of cross-sector collaboration, and the consequences for organisational development and resilience. Such a study might focus empirical work on some of the issues highlighted in the context chapter (Chapter 3) – for example the changing dynamics, size, governance, and focus, of the children’s voluntary sector over the last 20 years in which the policy narrative of cross-sector partnership has developed. My choice to focus on the individual in this study came from two sources – firstly, from my own experiences (introduced in Chapter
sector leader as the unit of analysis, and on individual enactment and sensemaking, but also on understanding practice in relation to this context. In order to explore this relationship between individual practice and context, I collected data through interviews, observations, and document collation during a two year period from 2010 to 2012. Interviews provided the main source of data at the individual level; national policy and local organisational and partnership documents provided data which gave insight into context, and observations provided opportunities to see individuals engaged in that context for myself. Together these data sources begin to provide the content for the thick description described above.

Table 3 lists each data source, and the contribution each makes to the thick description of the work of cross-sector collaboration.

1) which continue to reinforce the significance of the individual in the context of cross-sector collaboration, and secondly from the literature review (Chapter 2), which similarly suggested that the individual is significant in the ongoing work of collaboration.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data source</th>
<th>Data collection</th>
<th>Contributes to thick description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>21 initial interviews. 3 follow-up interviews\textsuperscript{12}. Details of interviewees Table 4.</td>
<td>Participant voices. Accounts of practice, experience and feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings</td>
<td>Terms of reference, minutes, publicity material, directories of VCOs. Observation of partnership and network meetings - detailed in Table 5.</td>
<td>Local context Individuals acting in context. Practice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3: Data Sources**

Below, I describe the methods of data collection adopted for each data source, before going on to outline the processes of data analysis.

### 4.3.1 Individuals

Semi-structured interviews presented an opportunity to explore with individual participants their perceptions of collaborative working with the public sector, and retrospective reflections on their role as leaders in the context of cross-sector collaboration.

\textsuperscript{12} Two interviews took place in 2013 outside the initial fieldwork period due to participant availability. These provided an opportunity to test initial findings.
4.3.1.1 Interviewee recruitment

The aim was to recruit a purposive sample of informants, strategically engaging with those able to speak with relevance on the research question (Bryman, 2008, p.333-334), rather than generating a representative sample. An original proposal to recruit participants with formal roles to represent the voluntary sector at Children’s Trust Boards was quickly amended due to the speed of policy change related to these particular partnership entities, and the consequent redundancy of this role in many local areas, as outlined in Chapter 2 above. An attempt to contact potential participants by email from lists of sector representatives on local authority websites resulted in only one response, in which the respondent queried how I had obtained his details.

Instead, I decided to focus on individuals who practice collaboration across the sector divide, rather than on any formal role or label, identifying participants through a snowballing approach (ibid p.100-102), building on contacts from my former work (and volunteering) experience. This process began with six initial contacts, who gave me names of colleagues who might be willing to speak with me on the topic. They also helped me to access voluntary sector networks where I observed leaders from the sector, and approached further prospective participants. At each of these points, some individuals declined the invitation to engage with the research, failed to reply to my emails, or politely disengaged themselves from the conversation.

I sought participants who met the following criteria:
- They are leaders within a voluntary or community project which supports children, youth and families. Here ‘leader’ is not defined by any formal title, but rather by the coordination or management of human, financial and other resources.

- They are engaged in joint projects, working groups, and / or project boards across the sector boundary, with public agencies. The relationship between their voluntary organisation and public sector agencies may include but recognisably moves beyond that of contractor and contract holder, seeking to influence service design and delivery, and public sector priorities.

Many of the interviewees engage in collaborative arrangements with public sector partners at multiple levels from service delivery to strategy development, as described in the earlier chapters of this thesis.

Although I had expected to encounter little difficulty with access due to my own involvement in the sector, I found this increasingly challenging as the environment changed over the period of the study, with the introduction of public sector cuts, and increasing anxiety about the future of services and jobs. On the other hand, one participant offered himself as an interviewee after meeting me at a youth project where I was volunteering, after he asked me about my day job. This was just one example of how connections made at the level of a shared interest in practice were more successful routes to participant recruitment, than attempts to contact individuals through the internet and email.
While the focus of this study is primarily on those who can speak about leadership in the children’s voluntary sector from a perspective of current employment in that sector, three participants identified through the snowballing process currently work within public sector children’s services, with a remit which includes partnership with the voluntary sector, and with extensive previous experience in and alongside the voluntary sector. Speaking with and observing these participants provided some limited opportunities for comparison with participants currently employed in the voluntary sector, but their interviews focused on their experience of the voluntary sector, as with other interviewees. Findings which relate specifically to interviewees now working in the public sector are highlighted as such in the findings chapter.

This also drew my attention to the fact that several participants, as indicated in Table 4 below, had experience of employment within both voluntary and public sectors. Indeed, discussion with some participants revealed considerable complexity over their sectoral employment. In one example, an interviewee identified through a voluntary sector network meeting, was employed by a voluntary trust to work in a public sector school, in order to link that school to community projects and voluntary organisations. A second participant revealed to me that while she worked for a voluntary organisation, managed by its trustees, her employment was managed by a public agency. While these experiences are by no means representative, it highlights the complexity of some individuals’ relationship with both sectors. This is not, however, simply a complication of participant recruitment, but draws attention to the issue of the ‘fuzziness’ of sectoral boundaries (see Chapter 2), and to the issue of how individuals identify themselves in regard to the sector in which they currently or previously worked.
In order to place interviewees in their local work context, I collected a range of documents from organisational websites, community information points, and office visits; interviewees also offered documents they thought might be useful to the research. Documents were stored electronically, with the exception of some leaflets and handouts which could not be accessed in an electronic format. These documents provided background information which has aided understanding and interpretation of the interview data.

Table 4 below lists interviewees, together with their job function, a brief description of their engagement in partnership working, and previous employment. Pseudonyms are used in order to protect anonymity, as promised to all participants as part of the consent process.
### Table 4: Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Employment &amp; Job Role</th>
<th>Partnership Engagement</th>
<th>Previous Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td>Local voluntary sector infrastructure organisation; Chief Exec.</td>
<td>Represent sector on children’s services committee, support other sector reps.</td>
<td>National voluntary organisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ian*</td>
<td>Voluntary sector youth support agency; Chief Exec.</td>
<td>Sector representative for Children’s Trust; facilitation of service developments across sectors.</td>
<td>Public sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trudy*</td>
<td>Local voluntary sector infrastructure organisation; children’s services lead.</td>
<td>Facilitation of network which supports sector representation at Children’s Trust and other partnership groups.</td>
<td>Voluntary sector youth support agency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katrina</td>
<td>Voluntary sector youth support agency; consultant.</td>
<td>Facilitation of representation in partnership structures, including Children’s Trust.</td>
<td>Public sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>Voluntary sector faith organisation; facilitator community projects.</td>
<td>Service development across sectors; engagement in cross-sector community projects.</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colin</td>
<td>Voluntary sector youth and family support agency; Chief Exec.</td>
<td>Service development across sectors; member partnership boards; former sector rep Children’s Trust Board</td>
<td>Public sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Voluntary sector childcare development and delivery agency; business advisor.</td>
<td>Service development across sectors; member partnership groups; advisor to public sector colleagues.</td>
<td>Private sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>Voluntary sector family support agency; area consultant.</td>
<td>Voluntary sector representative Children’s Trust Board.</td>
<td>Human Resources (sector unknown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>Voluntary sector trust; facilitation of community projects within group of academies.</td>
<td>Service development across sectors; engagement in partnership groups.</td>
<td>Voluntary sector - performing arts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric*</td>
<td>Voluntary sector rural support agency; provision of child and family support services through schools.</td>
<td>Voluntary sector representative Children’s Trust Board; service development and delivery across sectors.</td>
<td>Public and voluntary sector agencies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Voluntary sector family support agency; manager volunteer projects.</td>
<td>Partnership with public sector services in service development and delivery.</td>
<td>Voluntary sector faith organisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellie</td>
<td>Voluntary sector family support agency; local co-ordinator.</td>
<td>Manages service delivery and development in partnership with local authority services.</td>
<td>University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Research participants cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Employment &amp; Job Role</th>
<th>Partnership Engagement</th>
<th>Previous Employment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Keith</td>
<td>Voluntary sector youth and family support agency; service and network development and delivery.</td>
<td>Facilitator of cross-sector forum; service delivery through schools.</td>
<td>Not known.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josie</td>
<td>Voluntary sector children’s services agency; Chief Exec.</td>
<td>Service development and delivery in partnership with local authorities.</td>
<td>Public sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pauline</td>
<td>Voluntary sector family support agency; Chief Exec.</td>
<td>Service development and delivery in partnership with local authority; engagement in local partnership group linked to Children’s Trust.</td>
<td>Unknown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>Voluntary sector advice agency; deputy manager.</td>
<td>Service delivery in partnership with local authority and other public sector agencies.</td>
<td>Private sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benjamin</td>
<td>Voluntary sector family support project; Chair.</td>
<td>Service development and delivery in partnership with local authority; engagement in local partnership group linked to Children’s Trust.</td>
<td>Public sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Voluntary sector education development and service delivery; programme manager.</td>
<td>Service development and delivery in partnership with public and voluntary sector agencies and schools; member of partnership board for service development.</td>
<td>Public sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Former voluntary sector, now public sector manager of children’s services.</td>
<td>Liaison with voluntary sector on children’s services development and delivery.</td>
<td>National children’s services voluntary organisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leila</td>
<td>Former voluntary sector, now public sector manager, community engagement.</td>
<td>Facilitation of community and voluntary sector engagement with local authority.</td>
<td>Voluntary sector organisations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Manager of information and support service for families, managed within local authority in partnership with community and parent representatives.</td>
<td>Facilitation of inter-agency engagement in development and delivery of information services.</td>
<td>Public sector teacher.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*These interviewees participated in follow-up interviews.*
4.3.1.2 Limitations of the recruitment process

In ethnographically informed research, access to informants is an ongoing process which frequently leads to a revision of the initial research strategy (Flick, 2007, Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, O’Reilly, 2009). As outlined above, my initial attempt to recruit participants from published lists of sector representatives met with little success, and I consequently adopted a snowballing approach to participant recruitment, which began with my own contacts from prior work and volunteering experience. This approach identifies further participants through ‘people who know people who know people who know what cases are information rich’ (Patton, 2002, p.243), also described as ‘chain referral sampling’ (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). Achieving a purposive sample through the mechanism of snowballing had both negative and positive impacts on the sample itself, and on the direction of the research. Specifically, this highlighted issues around the homogeneity (O’Reilly, 2009) (or otherwise) of the participant group, and the likely impact on the data collected.

The snowballing approach led to a particular clustering of participants. I began with contacts from my work experience based in one locality. The majority of the participants engaged regularly in local voluntary sector networks. They signposted to colleagues in these and related networks, who they considered to be engaged in and knowledgeable about cross-sector collaboration. They also facilitated access to network meetings where I was introduced as a researcher, and was consequently able to approach individuals who evidenced interest in the research topic. This produced a group of participants who were primarily concentrated in two neighbouring local authority areas, but whose work extended throughout a much wider
region of the UK. Some participants were either directly engaged in, or managed staff engaged in, cross-sector collaboration in several localities, with bases away from the two neighbouring authorities. This clustering was largely helpful, as it allowed discussion of experiences from different localities and collaborative arrangements, but also gave access to multiple accounts of the same event or process. The proximity of the majority of participants meant that I encountered several in different contexts – in interview, and then in observation; in observation of different contexts; and in my own continued engagement as a volunteer in the local voluntary sector. In addition, as well as producing knowledgeable and engaged participants, the snowballing approach uncovered the network of relationships between individuals, and gave me access to opportunities to observe interaction between participants (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). Several participants worked together on different projects, issues, and in collaborative processes. In interview they spoke about each other, and provided a different perspective from that presented by the individual themselves. This all contributed to the richness of the data, bringing different perspectives, different accounts of the same event, and accounts of the experience of collaborative practice in different localities. This greatly contributed to the aim to produce a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of situated practice.

Less positively, the fact that many of the participants knew each other required considerable care in data collection from an ethical perspective, in order to maintain confidentiality. It also raised questions around the potential for bias. Did individuals signpost to others knowing that they thought alike? Had they already expressed an opinion to each other of me and my research, which impacted on their interview responses? How might their knowledge of me and my professional networks impact on their interview responses? Who was excluded from
participation in the research because they were not networked with the initial participants? Recruitment via personal and occupational contacts may have the effect of hiding different perspectives, as it excludes those who are not embedded in these networks (Browne, 2005, O'Reilly, 2009).

Here, the small number of interviewees located outside of the two initial areas provided a useful alternative perspective. In addition, data collection through observation provided an important balance to the potential for bias in the interviews of closely linked participants. It allowed opportunities to observe interviewees in collaborative contexts, and also to observe the practice of a much wider group of individuals. In particular, observation of the Voluntary Sector Debates (see detail at 4.3.2) provided an opportunity to observe practice outside the initial two localities. However, the participant group was not sufficiently homogenous and geographically concentrated to provide an entirely localised ethnographic account of practice. Even when existing contacts introduced me to other potential contacts, the latter sometimes failed to respond to an interview request, while other participants presented themselves for interview through informal networks. This left some gaps in terms of accessing a full account of localised practice. For example, I observed a sector representative, and at the end of the meeting was introduced by a mutual acquaintance in the sector, who was also a prior interviewee. Having observed this individual's practice, I was keen to access her views through an interview, and our mutual acquaintance followed up the meeting with an introduction by email. However, this individual did not in the end take up the invitation to participate in an interview.
The snowballing approach also produced a participant group which was heterogeneous in terms of job role, and in terms of their experience of cross-sector collaboration. Indeed, this is a likely outcome of an ongoing iterative process of participant recruitment (Flick, 2007). While one participant had experience of top level Children’s Trust Boards in multiple localities, another struggled to access lower level working groups to deliver projects which reached across the sector divide. Initially, I was uncertain whether the latter had much to offer the study, but determined that the insight from struggling to engage was as important as that given by individuals who told more positive stories. The heterogeneity of the participant group changed the direction of the research – away from sector representatives collaborating in formal boards, and towards practices of collaboration. Again, this had a largely positive impact on the research. It drew out a more complex picture of collaborative practice at a multiplicity of interconnected levels – formal and informal; interpersonal and inter-organisational; structured and fluid. Negatively, this heterogeneity made it more difficult to categorise the data gathered from different individuals. I was hesitant in categorising the data across individual cases. Approaching the data through different analytical lenses was important here, as the different lenses provided different ways of thinking about both similarities and differences.

The significance to a research project of the potential negative outcomes of a sample recruited via snowballing depends on the purpose of that study. This approach to recruitment is clearly not appropriate to a study which aims for statistical generalisation – that study requires a sample which is representative of the larger population. If, however, the purpose is to generate insight into individual practice and sensemaking, then the purposeful recruitment of knowledgeable, engaged, and willing participants is the researchers’ goal (Patton, 2002), and

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insight into their views on what doesn’t work is as important as insight into what does work. The researcher need neither affirm nor deny the accounts of individuals (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This is not of course to suggest that everything that participants say is simply taken at face value and incorporated into the account of the research, but it is to affirm that what individuals say in research contexts should be valued, and considered carefully and reflexively (Alvesson, 2003).

This in turn highlights the self-reporting aspect of all interview-based research. Whatever the mechanism adopted for participant recruitment, there is always a danger that interviewees report what they believe the researcher wants to hear. The reflexive researcher continually probes an interviewee’s responses, aware of the potential factors impacting on the construction of that account (Alvesson, 2011). Approaching research through interviews draws on an assumption that social actors are knowledgeable and able to speak reflexively about themselves and their environment (Patton, 2002), but this is not to suggest that they are unbiased witnesses conveying objective information, or that their self-knowledge is without blind spots. Acknowledging the value of interviews, the insight which they bring, I also acknowledge their limitations. Interviewees, consciously or otherwise, present a version of themselves, their experience, and their environment (Alvesson, 2011) – an interpretation which is re-interpreted by the researcher.

In this study, the multiple sources of data and methods of analysis assist this process of interpretation. Interviews provide only one source of data amongst others, as the ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of collaborative practice is built up through different data sources and analytical lenses. The narratives called forth in the interview context are seen as one way
amongst others in which individuals make sense of their experience – they are not so much an account of sense which has been made, but rather part of the sensemaking process. Interviews are not here understood as providing access to inner ‘truth’ or facts of organisational life, but are instead understood as moments of sensemaking which are co-constructed by interviewer and interviewee (Alvesson, 2003), which provide insight into collaborative practice as it is experienced and made sense of by the individual. In those moments, interviewer and interviewee together construct narratives and ideas, which provide insights which stimulate further exploration by the researcher. That further exploration is enabled by the research design which draws on multiple sources of data and multiple approaches to analysis.

My aim then is to adopt an approach towards interviews and their interpretation of ‘reflexive pragmatism’ (Alvesson, 2003), which produces initial interpretations, and also challenges those interpretations through the multiple layers of analysis; but which also balances reflexivity with a pragmatic sense of direction which postpones doubt and makes best use of the material, even with its limitations.

4.3.1.3 Interview format

Semi-structured interviews with leaders from voluntary and community projects explored issues central to the research – cross-sector partnership, leadership, and the policy context, working from an interview schedule which drew on broad themes identified from the research question. Working from themes, rather than a specific list of questions, using open-ended questions, and adopting a conversational style, allowed participants space to take the
conversation in directions which they assessed as significant (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, pp.117-118). I frequently probed initial responses – for example where the respondent provided a surprising response to my question, or a response I had heard before and wanted to check, or a brief response with the suggestion of further detail to be elicited. The aim here was not to produce responses which could be compared with each other, but rather to build up an in depth picture of the experience and views of individuals. The interview schedule is included in Appendix 2.

This approach draws on an understanding of the interviewee as an active participant in the interview process, who is constructing responses to questions as the interview proceeds, rather than revealing social facts or expressing views which were fixed prior to the interview. The final interview text can thus be understood as co-constructed by interviewer and interviewee within a specific local context (Alvesson, 2003, p.143).

As far as possible, I audio recorded interviews, and I transcribed them all myself. I took extensive notes during interviews, attempting to capture as much as possible of participants’ own words, but also noting body language and the context of the interview. During one interview the tape failed, and in another it cut out during a follow-up visit to an interviewee. Two participants indicated that they preferred not to be taped. Other interviews took place in venues where extraneous noise cuts across the recording. This inevitably means that some data has been lost, and that I have had to take care at the analysis stage to work as far as possible with interviewees’ own words, and to avoid inserting my own interpretation where their exact words have not been recorded.
The time commitment for transcription is considerable, and commentators discuss both the challenges and value of the researcher undertaking the transcription herself, rather than outsourcing this task (Alvesson, 2011, Bryman, 2008, p.329ff). However, transcription provided an important opportunity to increase my familiarity with the data. I also made a note during transcription of recurrent or surprising themes, and issues of interest to which I thought I might return: these were placed to one side for use at the analysis phase. I appended to the transcriptions brief field notes about the physical working environment, colleagues encountered, and any information gleaned about the organisation from observation of the office, in order to increase understanding of the working context of each interviewee (Bryman, 2008, p.306ff). An example appears in Box 2 below:
Visit to Leila’s workplace to set up interview:

I walked into the offices...and as I checked in with reception, noted the copies of an attractive magazine style document...This was one of just a few leaflets in the foyer and presented the impression of an organisation which prioritises children’s issues. (On examination the magazine carried the logos of both the council and the NHS.) The office entrance was modern, reinforcing the view of the exterior of an attractive building...

At the end of our discussion, Leila took me into the building and into her office in order to pick up documents she had promised me. This gave a slightly different impression – the building was well cared for but a rabbit warren of corridors. As we walked, we talked about the impact of office space on working patterns. Leila described the traditional formal board rooms that lay behind some closed doors. I observed smallish work areas – Leila’s had desks for perhaps 8 people. We talked about the large open plan offices used by some local authorities, and speculated whether this led to more or less communication between colleagues and across teams.

Box 2: Extract from field notes

Interviews provided then an opportunity to explore in depth with individuals how they perceive cross-sector collaboration, and to reflect on their leadership role, both within the organisation and in the partnership context. Interviewees were encouraged to contribute narratives (positive or negative) about influencing public sector agencies, and the
conversational style facilitated probing and follow-up questions. The collection of documents from work localities filled in background details of their work context, as did field notes made during visits to interviewees.

4.3.2 Meetings – observation and documentation

A second source of data related to meetings attended by participants. Again, access was complicated by the changing policy context and the impact of that context on practice. I was able to download minutes of meetings described by interviewees, terms of references, and other key documents from the websites of local authorities and voluntary sector networks, including Children’s Trust Boards in 3 localities. However, in one of these localities, the Board was dismantled, and in another interviewees described the lengthy process of reconfiguration. I was, however, able to observe Board meetings in a third locality.

At the local level then, I observed meetings of Loscombe Children’s Trust Board and of the related voluntary sector network, gaining access to the latter through an interviewee. At the national level, I observed a series of meetings, in which voluntary sector representatives debated policy and social issues with politicians. A summary of meetings attended appears in Table 5 below:

\[\text{Loscombe is a pseudonym to protect participant anonymity.}\]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>No. and Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loscombe Children’s Trust Board</td>
<td>Formal public meetings managed by the local authority. Attended by a range of organisational representatives, as well as council officers and members, and elected voluntary sector representatives.</td>
<td>4 meetings attended during 2011-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loscombe Children and Young People’s Network</td>
<td>Voluntary sector network attended by up to 30 sector leaders and key public sector leaders from children’s services.</td>
<td>3 network meetings attended during 2011-12, plus 1 representatives meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Voluntary Sector Debates</td>
<td>Attended by up to 200 individuals from VCOs, meeting with politicians to debate social issues and the role of the Voluntary Sector.</td>
<td>3 meetings attended during 2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5: Meetings observed**

The value of observation was threefold:

- Firstly, observation provided an insight into the detail of local context and practice, which is essential for thick description.
- Secondly, it provided an opportunity to note differences and similarities between practices I observed, the accounts of interviewees, and the official record found in minutes.

- Thirdly, attendance at meetings gave me an opportunity to engage with larger numbers of VCO leaders, and provided an opportunity to recruit further participants.

In addition, I collated minutes and other documents from meetings I observed, and from earlier meetings in the two additional localities. These drew my attention to the recurrence of topics, the presence and absence of sector representatives in the official record, and to narratives of collaboration. Again, I was able to compare the official record with interviewee accounts of their interventions in these meetings.

The aim was to collect as much material as possible about these meetings in which interviewees and their colleagues participate, either directly, or, in the case of the Board meeting, through systems of sector representation. In observation notes I attempted to capture details which set the scene, such as the location of the meetings, seating patterns, and nature and content of the participation of voluntary sector representatives, as well as describing the engagement of voluntary sector actors. A brief example appears in Box 3 below.
Scene Setting

The meeting is in the Council Chamber, a modern room in which table and chairs for the participants have been laid out in an (almost complete) circle (not sure why the gap is there, right opposite the Chair). At the edge of the room, on the same side as the entrance and opposite the Chair, chairs are laid out for members of the public and press. In my experience this is a less formal layout than most council chambers.

Name cards are on the tables before participants arrive. They state the person’s name and organisation, facing inwards so that they can be seen by other participants, but they are therefore not visible to me, or to others in the public area.

Several participants have already arrived and are drinking coffee and eating the sandwiches supplied by the authority. Others are still arriving...

The dress code appears to be semi-formal – some suits but not everyone.

There are 16 participants at the start of the meeting, and 9 attendees in the public area.

The meeting is chaired by the Councillor who leads for children’s services in the LA. No introductions are made to or by participants.

Box 3: Extract from observation notes
Before going on to explore in detail how different data generated at this stage were utilised in the analysis phase of the research, I will introduce the third source of data – government policy.

4.3.3 Policy

National policy which addresses the direction and management of local children’s services is a key element of the context within which participants and their organisations operate. I collected key government policy documents in order to examine how they present collaboration between public and voluntary sectors in the children’s services context, their description of the form and purposes of collaboration, and the expectations and limitations which they place on practice.

In identifying documents for analysis, the aim was to uncover the policy discourses of high profile influential texts (Bryman, 2008). I searched the Department for Education website (current and archived) for policy documents which deal with the breadth of children’s services policy and take a strategic approach, rather than with any government initiated programme or specific practice guidance.

As a former practitioner, I was aware of a series of policy documents associated from 2003 with the Labour government’s long term strategic ‘Change for Children’ policy. I retrieved these documents from the former government department publication web pages, moving forward chronologically to search for similar strategic documents from the current department. This search highlighted an important factor in comparing policy from the pre and
post 2010 election. While the ‘Change for Children’ programme emerged from Labour’s second successive period in government, and was developed further following a third successful general election, the documents from the Coalition government represent its first two years in power, in a new coalition arrangement. It is perhaps then unsurprising that this appears to have been a period of reviews, rather than strategies. When discussing documents from the coalition government, I therefore also pause to reflect on the reviews to which they respond, and to comment on their status. This is a frustration for the researcher undertaking her research during this period of change, but also reflects the policy environment encountered by practitioners. For the purpose of more direct comparison, I analysed one guidance document which was originally issued by the Labour Government, then updated by the Coalition.

Table 6 lists documents selected for analysis:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Government / Department</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td><em>Every child matters</em></td>
<td>Labour / DFES</td>
<td>Introduces change agenda for children’s services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td><em>Every child matters: change for children</em></td>
<td>Labour / DFES</td>
<td>Develops the detail of the change programme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td><em>Statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children’s Services and the Lead Member for Children’s Services</em></td>
<td>Labour / DCSF</td>
<td>Outlines the responsibilities of key individuals in leadership of children’s services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td><em>Children’s Trusts: statutory guidance on co-operation arrangements</em></td>
<td>Labour / DCSF</td>
<td>Outlines responsibilities for children’s services across organisational and sector boundaries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td><em>Early intervention: the next steps</em> (Also known as The Allen Review.)</td>
<td>Coalition / DfE</td>
<td>Government commissioned review of early intervention services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td><em>Supporting families in the foundation years</em></td>
<td>Coalition / DfE</td>
<td>Response to commissioned reviews and overview of policy for younger children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td><em>Statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children’s Services and the Lead Member for Children’s Services</em></td>
<td>Coalition / DfE</td>
<td>Outlines the responsibilities of key individuals in leadership of children’s services, updating Labour’s 2009 guidance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6: Policy documents selected for analysis**

**Notes:** DFES (Department for Education and Skills), DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families), DfE (Department for Education). These titles all refer to the Department which took lead responsibility for education throughout this period. Name changes reflect changing policy priorities, but also different understandings as to how best to ‘join up’ thinking and support at national level.

*There were two further government reviews related to child wellbeing in 2010-11. The Tickell Review (2011) focuses on the detail of early years curriculum, and has a single reference to the voluntary sector. It is consequently excluded from this analysis. The Field Review (2010) explores the issue of child poverty, addressing a broader range of issues and services than those generally described as children’s services, and is therefore excluded. In contrast, the Allen and Munro reviews specifically address the ‘whole system’ of children’s services.*
4.4 Data analysis

As indicated above, I took an iterative approach to data collection, analysis and interpretation. Analysis began during fieldwork, and continued through the stages of interpretation and conceptualisation, and on into the writing up period, as initial thoughts and ideas led me back to the data, which in turn caused me to re-visit interpretation. Below, I describe the analysis of each data source separately, but in practice, I moved between these data sources, with increasing understanding informing analysis of each. In addition, I continued to read documents gathered throughout the fieldwork, with the aim of continually increasing my understanding of local and national context.

I describe below how I made use of the qualitative software NVivo in order to store and retrieve data, code the texts, and undertake word counts. However, the aim of counting and coding was not to produce an analysis which focuses on statistical incidence, but rather to use counting and coding to surface ideas, and representations of collaboration and of the voluntary sector, highlighting similarities and differences, perceptions of the experience of collaborating, and the presence and absence of the voluntary sector in the policy discourse.

Throughout the project, writing has been a key analytic tool. As I typed up observation notes and transcribed interviews, I reflected on the people I had met and the issues they raised: at times I made notes on the transcripts using the review function in Word, or opened a new Word document in order to write a research note. These notes are distinct from field notes, in that they record my retrospective reflections. They helped me to familiarise myself with and
ask questions of the data. Hammersley and Atkinson describe such notes as constituting ‘precisely the sort of internal dialogue, or thinking aloud, that is the essence of reflexive ethnography’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.151). The notes were stored electronically, and reviewed throughout the analysis and writing up phases of the research. These early reflections on the data helped me to consider how the research was developing, and to register similarities and differences, questions and issues. This in turn helped me to probe future interviewees and to observe meetings with an increasing level of awareness of emergent issues. In the extract reproduced in Box 4 below, I provide an example of a research note in which I reflect on the voluntary sector leaders I have encountered during the research:
These are very able people often working for less salary than they could achieve in statutory services. Partnership working with people at a senior level may reconfirm for them that they have this ability.

These people have often come to the voluntary sector because they want to ‘change the world’ in some way. In meeting with senior managers and councillors in partnership meetings, they can maintain a ‘change’ discourse, a discourse which draws on an image of self as campaigner/crusader, and a discourse of others as decision-makers who can be influenced. This may cyclically reinforce their sense of identity as a ‘change the world’ person.

Alongside this change discourse, there is a secondary discourse of encountering resistance. For these individuals, the element of resistance may be integral to the crusading element of their self-conceptualisation as those who are seeking to change their world, and their motivation to make a difference.

**Box 4: Example of research note**

I continued writing research notes and early thoughts throughout analysis and conceptualisation, continually reflecting on issues and questions as they arose, and drafting and re-drafting early descriptions of findings, as I checked them back with the data, NVivo.
coding, word counts, emergent themes, and exploration of participants’ use of metaphor. This continual process of iterative analysis and reflection helped me to refine and check my initial thoughts, frequently returning me to the data, as I applied different analytical lenses to data from different sources. Coffey and Atkinson argue that such repeated interactions with the data produce rich analysis (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, pp.15-16).

As described below, reflective writing and re-writing were also the tools for stitching together the different aspects of the research - findings from different sources, and different analytical approaches, informed by the review of the sector in Chapter 3, and by the motivation for the research in my own experience. Below, I describe in detail the process of analysing data from each source, before describing how I moved on to conceptualisation, as I began to construct the research quilt from these different sources.

4.4.1 Interviews and observations – towards thematic analysis

Here I outline the stages of the thematic analysis in terms adopted from Braun and Clarke (2006, p.88) to describe movement through from the detailed review of individual texts to writing about themes across data texts. At each stage I indicate how I made use of electronic software, as well as sticky notes, hand written drafts and typed research notes. However, as already discussed the process was iterative and recursive, rather than sequential. For example, when writing definitions of themes and describing the data therein, I frequently questioned whether the data I had linked to the theme clearly related to other data linked to the same theme. This led me to return to the NVivo coding, and often to retrieve the full text from
which the data fragment had been extracted, leading me to re-visit the definition or naming of the theme.

I worked inductively from the data, ‘identifying, analysing and reporting patterns’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79). As far as possible I put aside preconceptions, allowing the research questions to guide my thinking as I read and re-read transcripts, looking for anything said about leadership, the voluntary sector, and collaborative working, coding fragments of data in NVivo, before identifying broad themes from this detailed coding. As the research questions focus on individual practice, I began thematic analysis by working with interview transcripts, later cross-referencing emergent themes with observation notes.

The stages of this thematic analysis are described below:

1. **Familiarisation**

   I collected data, transcribed, annotated and wrote research notes in Word, as well as noting issues on sticky notes. Notes made at this stage were not transferred into NVivo, but increased my understanding of the texts prior to coding.

2. **Generate codes**

   Interview transcripts were coded in NVivo using open coding, searching for topics, views, and anecdotes in the texts which might provide insight into the research questions, and the key issues of leadership, the voluntary sector and partnership/collaboration.
When all interview transcripts had been coded once, the process was repeated, recognising that insight develops during the coding process, but also the possibility of having missed relevant material, or misunderstood the text. This second coding stage highlighted inconsistencies (similar ideas coded in different ways), overlaps (two codes apparently with the same or at least similar meaning), but also allowed me to apply codes identified in later transcripts to the earlier transcripts where applicable. Some codes were merged, others were identified as conceptually too broad and separated out. I then repeated this process a third time. The total number of codes generated at this point was 162. These codes are listed alphabetically in Table 7 below.

3. Search for themes

After coding each interview transcript, I began to search the coding for broader themes. A theme ‘captures something important about the data in relation to the research questions, and represents some level of patterned response of meaning within the data set’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.82). To identify these patterns, I printed out the coded references (data fragments), and read through those under each code, looking for relationships between codes, marking the printout with a highlighter pen, and noting key concepts which emerged from my reading on sticky notes, such as ‘Values’, ‘Sector identity’, ‘Legitimacy’, and grouping related sticky notes. At various points, I scribbled rough notes to try to explore the links between these different ideas, and to test if I could show the links graphically, or describe them with words.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adaptation</th>
<th>Differences</th>
<th>Inspiration</th>
<th>Leadership survival</th>
<th>Perceptions of VCS</th>
<th>Strategic responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advising</td>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Interdependence</td>
<td>L’ship without authority</td>
<td>Persuasion</td>
<td>Strategic role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aims</td>
<td>Early intervention</td>
<td>Intermediary</td>
<td>Learning together</td>
<td>Physical environment</td>
<td>Super-hero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>Legitimacy</td>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Survival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back room deal</td>
<td>Entrepreneurship</td>
<td>Job fit</td>
<td>Localism</td>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balancing</td>
<td>Evidence based</td>
<td>Job role</td>
<td>Long/short term</td>
<td>Power</td>
<td>System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being around</td>
<td>Family dependency</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Longevity</td>
<td>Pragmatism</td>
<td>Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being heard</td>
<td>Finance / Value</td>
<td>LA absence</td>
<td>Meetings</td>
<td>Prejudice</td>
<td>Tensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge</td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>LA approach</td>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>Private sector</td>
<td>Tokenism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change</td>
<td>Formal/Informal</td>
<td>LA culture</td>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>Professional b’grd</td>
<td>Town Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change management</td>
<td>Forum participation</td>
<td>LA differences</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Fragmentation</td>
<td>LA help</td>
<td>Networks extended</td>
<td>Profile</td>
<td>Transparency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissioning</td>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>LA priorities</td>
<td>Offloading</td>
<td>Protest</td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Gaps in provision</td>
<td>LA services</td>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>LA structures</td>
<td>Organisation size</td>
<td>Quality of life</td>
<td>User perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison</td>
<td>Identification need</td>
<td>LA understanding</td>
<td>Organisational altruism</td>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>USP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Org’nal background</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complementary</td>
<td>Illusion</td>
<td>Leader as catalyst</td>
<td>Org’nal reputation</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>VCS as reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultation</td>
<td>Image</td>
<td>Leader as champion</td>
<td>Organisational role</td>
<td>Representation</td>
<td>VCS identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consulting</td>
<td>Impact</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>Responsive</td>
<td>VCS image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>Inactivity</td>
<td>Lead’ship as facilitation</td>
<td>Pace</td>
<td>Risk</td>
<td>VCS leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-ordination</td>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>Leadership as learning</td>
<td>Parents as partners</td>
<td>Role confusion</td>
<td>VCS partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cosy</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Leadership context</td>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Sector coherence</td>
<td>VCS resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Influence</td>
<td>Lead’ship development</td>
<td>Partnership content</td>
<td>Sector differences</td>
<td>VCS structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Leadership for good</td>
<td>Partnership costs</td>
<td>Servant</td>
<td>Voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making</td>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>Leadership shared</td>
<td>Partnership structures</td>
<td>Shared understanding</td>
<td>Volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delivery</td>
<td>Insider / Outsider</td>
<td>Leadership style</td>
<td>Partnership working</td>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Withdrawal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7: Coding of Interviews in NVivo**

**Note:** LA= Local Authority
As I began to pick out broader themes, I started to attempt to write definitions. Where the initial attempt indicated that the theme was not coherent, or that the data fragments did not evidence the theme, I revisited the data and began the process again. The aim was to ensure that fragments of data were appropriately linked to each other and to the theme. The coding in NVivo was thus used as an index to access the data, rather than as a mechanism for the hierarchical structuring of initial ideas into broader topics. In taking this approach, I sought to avoid two of the dangers of using qualitative software. Firstly, I wanted to avoid adding together the number of related references to focus on what is said most, which can subtly move the research from a focus on meaning to a focus on quantities. Secondly, I wanted to avoid any sense of a hierarchy of meaning, and so did not use the hierarchical tree structure facility in the software, but attempted to focus instead on the interpretation and meaning of words as I read them and wrote about them. Writing and re-writing were again key tools in this phase.

4. Review themes

As themes emerged from this analysis of interview texts, I compared what was said on these themes in interviews with my observation notes (loaded into NVivo), noting similarities and differences. I noted examples from observation which appeared to confirm what was said, and examples which appeared to conflict, or at least contrast with what was said. In some cases, this led me to think again about the themes. As links began to emerge between different interview texts or interviews and observation notes, I developed short narratives as examples of practice, as described further below.
5. Define and name themes

I wrote a description of each theme, as it emerged from this process, checked again that the data and description fitted together, and determined on a name for each theme. In writing about a theme, it sometimes became clear that the initial name was inappropriate, potentially misleading, or did not fully represent the data. I reviewed these descriptions and names frequently, until content that they were sufficiently clear and robust to be included in the final thesis.

From the analysis outlined above, I eventually identified nine broad themes from interview and observation data which are explored in Chapter 6. However, I recognise that thematic analysis is necessarily a reductive process, which can have the effect of obscuring the relationship between the coded text and context (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p.52), and consequently reducing meaning. I therefore continued with further layers of analysis as outlined below. These additional analytical stages also produced different perspectives on the data, moving towards the ‘thick description’ described in the first half of this chapter, and reasserting the significance of context to the study.

4.4.2 Beyond thematic analysis: re-contextualising the data

As the focus of the study is on individual actors working in a specific socio-political context, it was important to place the data back into that context, which is a key aspect of an ethnographic approach (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, pp.174-181). In addition, the emphasis of the research question on practice suggested it was important to try to reconstruct what participants do, as well as what they say, and to explore the relationship between the
two. To do this I returned to my observation notes and additional field notes, and reviewed these in the light of the emergent themes as described above as Stage 4 of thematic analysis.

I developed short narrative vignettes, reconstructed from the data, and informed by the thematic analysis, in which I describe ‘examples of collaborative practice’, drawing on both observation and interview accounts. I considered how these illuminated the major themes identified earlier, or re-directed my attention elsewhere. Through the development of these narratives I attempted to move beyond analysis as the classification and coding of data fragments to the ‘representation or reconstruction of social phenomena’ (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p.108). Examples of these narratives of practice are included in the findings chapters of this thesis. They should not be considered as providing a stand-alone analysis of the data, but rather present a more dynamic picture of individuals and processes in action, than is presented in fragments of interview texts. They show the interaction of people and processes, the conflicts and contradictions which arise, the apparent disjunctions which emerge between what people say, and what they appear to do, and differences of interpretation between individuals.

4.4.3 Beyond thematic analysis: metaphor

In the course of thematic analysis, I noted that some interviewees conveyed their experience of collaboration, and consequently provided insight into their feelings about that experience, through their use of metaphor. I therefore decided to re-examine all interview transcripts, focusing not on what participants say, as in the thematic analysis, but rather on how they say it (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.97ff), specifically on their use
of metaphor. This stage of analysis followed the stages outlined by Cameron and Maslen—
identify the metaphors\textsuperscript{14}; consider the context for their use; find patterns in use; draw
inferences from their use (Cameron and Maslen, 2010, p.7).

I re-read each interview text again, noting examples of metaphor and coding them in a
separate node in NVivo, so that these examples could be easily retrieved. Where appropriate, I
also linked these examples to the thematic coding. Following coding in NVivo, I compared use
of metaphor across interview texts, grouping together examples of metaphor by identifying
similarities or significant dissimilarities. I then began to write descriptions of these groups of
metaphors, outlining the ways in which metaphors were similar to, or different from each
other, both linguistically, and in usage.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) point to the value of exploring ‘how language is used figuratively’
through metaphor, in which they include analogies, similes, ‘and other kinds of imagery’,
suggesting that ‘examination of such aspects of language use can illuminate how individuals
and groups organize and express their experiences’ (ibid p.84), and provide insight into
meaning (ibid p.85). This approach focuses on the analysis of language as a route to greater
understanding the speaker, rather than as statement of fact, or as a mechanism to determine
which topics are talked about most. Lakoff and Turner argue that metaphor plays a central
role in ordinary discourse, revealing ‘our understanding of our selves, our culture, and the
world at large’ (Lakoff and Turner, 1989, p.214). Consequently, the study of metaphor in use
provides insight into the speaker’s perceptions of herself and of the world:

\textsuperscript{14} Following Coffey and Atkinson, I adopted a broad definition of metaphor for this purpose, including all
types of imagery, similes and picture language, as well as metaphors (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p.84).
‘Metaphor offers a tool for understanding people’ (Cameron and Maslen, 2010, p.7)

Findings from this analysis are presented in the second half of Chapter 6. However, in order to illustrate the value of this analytical tool in illustrating and raising questions about participants’ meaning, I provide an example below of my notes in which I compare metaphors used by two participants. My focus in this note is on identifying what the participants are trying to express through their choice of metaphor, in what ways they are conveying something which is similar (or different), but also on the way in which their metaphors suggest how they feel about the experiences they describe. Each interviewee uses metaphors which suggest that they must attend to competing demands. They suggest experientially how this feels, and consequently what it is like to encounter and manage such demands.
Looking in two directions, or two different worlds?

Ian told me he often described himself as Janus-like, suggesting that the demands on him required him to look in two directions at the same time. Later, in response to another question, he suggested perhaps he was a multiple Janus, looking in several directions. In the context of his representational role on behalf of the voluntary sector, he conveyed the need to look to the interests of his own organization, as well as those of the local authority led partnership, and thirdly those of other voluntary sector organizations, and that these interests were not necessarily compatible with each other. The image also suggests that these different interests are equally valid demands on Ian, as Janus consistently looks in both directions, rather than moving between one and the other. However, the Janus image also suggests that Ian is fitted for this challenge – he doesn’t have to keep turning his head, but metaphorically is capable of looking in several directions at once.

Eric described his role as sector representative as like ‘straddling different realities’. This suggests a similar experience to that conveyed by the Janus image, with the sector representative aware of different interests, and his own significance in ensuring he is in contact with each of those interests. However, the ‘different realities’ image is suggestive of different worlds which are not inhabited by the same people (rather than simply different interests), with Eric one of the few who is straddling between the two. This suggests some discomfort, and loneliness too in this position.

Of course, neither image should be considered in isolation from the complete interview text, but it would appear that while Ian and Eric both convey a sense of the tensions of leadership in the context of sector representation, Eric’s choice of imagery is darker, more negative, and more challenging to the individual leader.

Box 5: Example of research note – participant metaphor
This brief example of ‘thinking out loud’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) gives some indication of the richness which can be added to the analysis through a focus on participants’ use of metaphor.

4.4.4 Policy analysis

I explored the following questions through analysis of the policy texts identified in Table 6 above:

- How does each policy document present the role of the children’s voluntary sector?
- What is the nature of the collaborative partnership between the voluntary and public sector presented within each document?
- What does this presentation suggest about the approach of each government towards the children’s voluntary sector?
- What might the implications be for children’s voluntary sector organisations and their leaders?

Analysis consisted of several stages, in order to identify and reconstruct narratives of cross-sector collaboration from the selected policy texts. Rather than simply identifying key policy statements, I examined the detailed language of the texts, exploring the words and concepts used to describe cross-sector collaboration. This process surfaced consistencies, inconsistencies and ambiguities in the presentation of cross-sector collaboration in these texts.
Bryman describes this interpretive process as qualitative content analysis (Bryman, 2008, p.392). Initial categories are brought to the analysis in very general terms – in this case the concept of a distinct voluntary sector and the concept of cross-sector collaboration, generally described in policy as ‘partnership’. A key step in content analysis is a text search of synonymous terms in order to explore these categories. The results of such a search indicate the prevalence of these terms, and may therefore indicate their significance in the text. However, in order to understand the meaning of the text, it is important to return to the context in which they are used, and to the purposes of the document.

Analysis followed the following stages:

1. Read the text, noting synonyms or near synonyms for ‘voluntary sector’ and ‘collaboration’.

2. Store the text in NVivo and run a text search on the terms identified.

3. Code each incidence for ease of retrieval, rejecting false positives.

4. Read through each incidence in context in order to understand its use.

5. Use open coding to group together related sections of text. For example, those referring to the voluntary sector as a service provider, or those focused on the sector as strategic partner.
6. Review the coding, and re-code where further links are identified.

7. Re-read each text in the light of the coding to identify narratives of voluntary and public sector collaboration which emerge from consistencies across the coding, but also from inconsistencies and ambiguities. Write notes defining emergent narratives.

8. Write a review of the findings from each text, relating these findings to the purpose and political context of the text.

9. Note differences and similarities across key documents, drawing on the NVivo coding and written review of each text.

This process of analysis identified changes in the language used to describe collaboration and the voluntary sector, which suggest a change in the models of collaboration proposed by policy, but also point towards ambiguity in the narratives of policy. These findings are presented in Chapter 5.

4.4.5 From analysis to conceptualisation: constructing the patchwork quilt

The multi-layered approach to data analysis reported here reflects the approach to research outlined at the top of this chapter, the understanding that each research method can reveal only a partial perspective on the social world, and that multiple interactions with data sources reveal a richer picture which moves from what is said and done, to what is meant and experienced, to the relationship between the individual and the environment, to a cultural
world, and the practice of individuals within that world. It also resonates with the ‘researcher-as-bricoleur’ or quilt-maker metaphor adopted to illustrate my understanding of my role as researcher, as I turn each piece in different ways, putting them together to create a whole which does not mask the different origin of each element. However, this also draws attention to the question as to how this whole is constructed.

In Chapters 5 and 6 I report the findings from different data sources, in order to reveal their contribution to the research. Through the Discussion in Chapter 7, I stitch together these different elements of the research. In doing this I inevitably highlight some issues which emerged from analysis and obscure others in order to produce an account which is both readable and addresses the research questions. Moving from the findings of analysis to conceptualisation and the writing of the discussion chapter has been a reflexive process achieved primarily through writing and re-writing research notes, memos and drafts, in which I reflected on the possible meaning of the findings, their relationship with each other, and with the literature. Follow-up interviews with 3 participants contributed to this process, providing an opportunity to share emergent conceptualisation, and respond to participants’ comments.

4.5 Ethics

The project received ethical consent from the Open University Ethics Committee, and follows the ethical guidelines of the Open University. I gave all interviewees an information sheet explaining the purposes of the research and assuring them of anonymity, and asked them to sign a consent form, explaining they could withdraw from the project at any point (see
Appendix 3). When planning to attend meetings held in public, I exchanged an email with meeting convenors telling them of my intent to take observe and take notes for research purposes, and received replies assuring me of the public nature of the meeting. Where meetings were not held in public, I was given consent to attend by the convenor, who introduced me to the chair. We agreed I would circulate information about my research to the group (see Appendix 2), introduce myself as a researcher at each meeting, and encourage attendees to express any concern. I was also asked not to quote these meetings directly, and for this reason, I have removed some details from my accounts.

This is not to suggest that consent processes resolve all ethical issues for the researcher. In the last months of the research, as I wrote up, one interviewee indicated that she might withdraw her consent. I assured her that everything I wrote would be anonymised, another name would replace hers, and that I would provide for the reader only the necessary details to locate her work within the wider context, and certainly not name the local authority area. As I had started to write draft descriptions of interviewees and narrative vignettes, I offered to send examples and emphasised that I would change anything she was concerned about. In a covering email, I also indicated that I would attempt to add a further layer of anonymity by obscuring details in any published paper. I waited for her reply, and was relieved when she indicated that her mind was set at rest.

Similar dilemmas arise with regard to observation data. The meetings of the Children’s Trust Board I attended are held in public: minutes and related papers are published openly on the internet. When I emailed the responsible council officer, I received a quick confirmation that the meetings are open to public observation. No one questioned me when I walked into the
council chamber and entered the area set aside for members of the public and journalists.

However, as I analysed data I became increasingly aware of differences between my observation notes and the public record. My notes include small asides by those sitting near me, as well as points raised in the meeting which are not in the minutes. This highlights the role played by formal minutes as a public record, but also as a partial representation. It also highlights the challenges of my own role as non-participant observer, and the importance of using my observation notes with care so as not to cause harm to any research participant.

Observation of meetings outside the public domain results in different ethical dilemmas – does consent to observe a meeting cover the pre-meeting which I am invited to attend? When an item is described as ‘confidential’, can I write about the process of the meeting, whilst retaining confidentiality over the content, which is not relevant anyway to the research question? These questions arise constantly whilst out in the field, and in the process of writing up the research.

Throughout this thesis, I have used pseudonyms for individuals, meetings and locations in order to protect anonymity. I have removed details from the narrative, which would contribute to the thick description and the authenticity of the account, in order to protect individuals who gave me access to their work and their views. I am aware as I do this of the potential vulnerability of individuals who are well known in their own sector, and whose organisations are often financially dependent on public sector partners. This emphasises my responsibility not to expose those individuals, to anonymise as carefully as possible, and to include in this thesis only that detail which is pertinent. At the same time, my thesis is dependent on the data, it is crucial to be able to include negative comments made about
public sector agencies, as well as those which are positive, and to portray sufficient detail to assure the reader that the account I present is an authentic one. Thus, in the re-drafting stages, I have continually questioned which details are necessary and which can be omitted.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented my approach to research to address my research questions, and to achieve the aims to uncover the experience of voluntary sector leaders in a specific socio-political context, presenting a thick description of their work, which may form the basis for the development of tools for reflective practice. I compared this approach to ethnography, acknowledging my own immersion in the research context, and describing the use of multiple sources, to develop an account of the practice of collaboration.

The second part of the chapter introduced each of the data sources, outlining the processes of data collection through interviews and observations, and some of the challenges of access in a swiftly moving policy (and political) context. I described the selection of key policy documents as a significant data source. This led to discussion of the adoption of an iterative approach to analysis, in which I adopted different analytical lenses to probe the data. Each lens provides an opportunity to uncover meaning, to review, complement, and contrast with what has previously been discovered, to resist any tendency towards reduction and singularity, and instead present a picture of complexity. At times, these multiple processes have indeed been ‘messy’ (Law, 2003), but this reflects the messy experience of operating in the policy driven context of voluntary and public sector collaboration.
Chapter 5

Findings (1) - Policy

5.1 Introduction

In Chapter 3, I outlined the broad policy context of this study, introducing the changing, complex, and at times ambiguous political and policy environment in which leaders of voluntary sector organisations operate. In this chapter, I return to policy, focusing on key government policy documents from 2003-12 which address the direction of children’s services, and the need for cross-sector collaboration to develop and deliver services to support children and their families. The purpose of this analysis is to understand how the two UK governments of this period present the voluntary sector and its role in children’s services through policy statements, commissioned reviews, and responses to those reviews\(^\text{15}\), and consequently to explore the implications of policy for collaborative practice.

Policy constitutes a key part of the context in which the participants in this study practice. It continually impacts on the practice of collaboration at multiple levels. At a broader level, it provides a narrative (or perhaps more accurately narratives) within which participants engage with public sector colleagues and with the raft of public sector led partnerships, working groups, joint projects and shared strategies. It is in this sense that Chapter 3 provides an account of the impact of policy on the relationship between the voluntary sector and the state.

\(^{15}\) These documents are issued by the UK government, but responsibility for children’s services policy in Wales and Scotland is devolved to the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament established in 1999. Consequently, the policy discussed here applies only to England.
At a more detailed level, specific policy documents outline responsibilities and require compliance. In the collaboration context, they introduce new collaborative entities, and new commissioning arrangements. They introduce and require public agencies to comply with frameworks for accountability, which impact on voluntary organisations collaborating across the sector divide. These documents specify the ‘must’ and ‘may’ on behalf of government. They also introduce government’s chosen language to describe the policy area, language which is laden with values and political connotations. When the specifications and language of policy change, the experience of working in cross-sector collaboration may also change in response. For all of these reasons, understanding the environment of cross-sector collaboration in children’s services necessarily implies understanding the policy which frames this collaboration.

This is not to suggest that individuals engaged in collaboration, including participants in this study, have an in-depth knowledge of all pertinent policy documents. Indeed, this study suggests the contrary – that many participants have only the most general sense of the requirements of current government policy. For some that sense includes an understanding that the implementation of national policy at the local level can be debated and challenged, while others present policy as if fixed and unquestionable. This raises interesting questions about how that general sense is conveyed to and received by individual actors. While it is not possible to answer that question for each of the individual participants in the study, the data presented in Chapter 6 provides some insight into how actors respond to policy change and its implementation at the local level.
This focus on individual actors in that chapter is juxtaposed with analysis of the meaning and language of policy here in Chapter 5, through a focus on specific policy documents from the children’s services field. Detailed attention to the policy text suggests that these documents provide a somewhat ambiguous narrative in regards to government’s framing of the expectations of voluntary sector engagement in children’s services. Successive governments frame this engagement differently in the policy discourse, but the ambiguity remains; the only clear role for the sector which emerges is that of service provider. The analysis of policy presented here contributes to the ‘thick description’ of collaborating which is developed throughout the thesis. When juxtaposed with the account of individual social actors in Chapter 6, this presents a picture of a world of complexity and ambiguity, in which there is both continuity and disjunction between national policy and local practice.

Findings from detailed textual analysis uncover how the language of policy contributes to the positioning of voluntary and community organisations in the complex mix of service delivery and strategic planning to meet the needs of children and their families. This analysis points to changes in the discursive positioning of the sector in policy over this period, highlighting differences between the approaches of the two governments. However, findings also point towards the ambiguity of the terms and concepts used to describe the sector, its role in supporting children and families, and its collaboration with the state. Consequently, the discourses of policy provide a somewhat ambiguous environment for collaborative practice.

The discussion below moves chronologically through key documents listed in Table 6 above. Firstly, I present findings from analysis of policy texts which relate to Labour’s ‘Change for Children’ programme. I then move on to discuss findings from reviews commissioned by the
Coalition government and from government responses to those reviews. Finally, I directly compare findings from key guidance on the leadership of children’s services published in two versions – firstly by Labour, and then in a revised version by the Coalition government. This discussion is illustrated by the results of text searches, and by brief quotes from the policy texts.

The chapter ends with a discussion of the implications of this analysis for the voluntary sector, and for the practice of cross-sector collaboration in children’s services.

5.2 Policy for partnership? The ‘Change for Children’ programme

As indicated earlier in the thesis, the Labour government of 1997-2010 was closely aligned to ‘Third Way’ politics, with its emphasis on a new partnership between state and private sector, but also on the value of community (Giddens, 1998). In a move away from the traditional socialist position of provision by the state, the Labour period was marked by a multiplicity of collaborative partnership arrangements across public, private, and voluntary and community sectors, in order to develop and deliver services across a range of complex policy issues, from law and order to transport, as well as a range of issues pertinent to children and families – early years, child protection, children with additional needs, and a strategic approach to local services for children and families through Children’s Trusts. This led to a complex partnership scenario across the children’s services field, with multiple overlapping inter-organisational relationships at different levels of ‘working together arrangements’ (Horwath and Morrison, 2007).
In this context, the ‘Change for Children’ programme (2003-2010) was a programme of strategic change, focused on changing outcomes for children over the medium to long term, and on encouraging organisations from all sectors to work together, and with individuals, families and communities, to achieve this end. Each of the documents analysed here provides an indicator of the intended trajectory of children’s services towards a focus on the needs of children, and away from organisational imperatives.

5.2.1 Every Child Matters

*Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) is the consultative (green) paper, which introduced government’s transformation agenda for children’s services, including the development of Children’s Trusts. These new collaborative governance arrangements are to be the key decision-making bodies for local children’s services. They will ‘integrate key services’ (ibid p.67), but are presented structurally as a part of the local authority. Although there are 22 references to the voluntary sector or voluntary organisations in the 102 page document, the sector is not included within the list of Children’s Trust partners, which is limited to public sector agencies (education, social services, and health services). Instead, the Trusts will ‘commission services and may provide them directly or contract with public, private or voluntary sector organizations’ (ibid p.71). Despite this absence from governance and identification as service provider, the sector is portrayed as sharing responsibility for the reform of service provision (ibid p.80), and local authorities are ‘to work closely with public, private and voluntary organisations to improve outcomes for children’ (ibid p.67). Here the
phrase ‘work closely with’ asserts both the importance of the cross-sector relationship, and its ambiguity.

Published one year later, the follow up policy document, *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (Department for Education and Skills, 2004), begins to set out the national change programme required to implement the transformation agenda introduced in the 2003 green paper. Building on the introduction of new statutory duties in the Children Act 2004, it outlines the ‘whole system’ change which government believes is needed in children’s services, to be ‘secured through more integrated front-line delivery, processes, strategy and governance’, also described as ‘the Children’s Trust in Action’ (ibid p.6). The voluntary sector is to be included in this move to an integrated approach, including the development of strategy, but it is still unclear whether the sector has a role to play in governance arrangements.

The voluntary sector is explicitly included in discussion of service delivery (ibid p.14), and practitioners from the sector are included in discussion of workforce development. Children need access to a range of services, working as a ‘multi-disciplinary team’ (ibid p.15), which must share a ‘common core’ of skills and knowledge, ensuring all members of the workforce ‘- across the public, private, voluntary and community sectors – can share language and an understanding of issues, and be supported in working more closely together’ (ibid p.17). In order to secure this shared approach across the children’s workforce, integrated processes will be introduced for information sharing and assessment, but there is no indication as to how practitioners from voluntary organisations will access these processes which are to be developed in the public sector. However, the voluntary sector is to be included in the
development of integrated strategy, including needs analysis, data sharing, and service planning.

This second *Every Child Matters* document builds on the 2003 green paper to begin to clarify what ‘working closely with’ the sector might mean, both in its explicit references to voluntary organisations and their workers, and in its omissions. The voluntary sector is to be a ‘partner’ in needs analysis and service delivery, but appears to have no role in governance.

### 5.2.2 A plan for children

In 2007, the re-named Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) published a *Children’s Plan*, an outline strategy to achieve the government’s intended outcomes for children and families over a 10 year period. Although the plan’s focus is not primarily on structures, it does make explicit the intended role for local authorities. Moving away from their historic role as service provider, the local authority role is to be that of,

‘strategic commissioner....working with local health and other partners and the voluntary and community sector to make sure that every child gets the best possible start in life...’ (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2007, p.100)(DCSF 2007 p.100).

The Children’s Trust must ensure ‘the full involvement of the voluntary and community sector in the commissioning function, and as providers...’ (ibid p.148), and the sector shares responsibility for ensuring change is achieved:
‘Making a reality of the vision...depends on parents, the community, statutory services, the voluntary sector and business working together...’ (ibid p.146)

For the first time, the text explicitly requires representation of the voluntary sector in local Children’s Trusts, contributing to needs analysis and service planning, and in turn being commissioned by the Trust for service delivery. However, the sector’s role in governance remains unclear.

This analysis of key texts from the ‘Change for Children’ programme for children’s services points to key issues for cross-sector collaborative practice during this period. These documents suggest that the sector is certainly to be included in new collaborative arrangements for service planning and delivery, and shares responsibility for successful outcomes. However, they are ambiguous, and at times silent, about the place of the sector in the governance of collaborative partnership, and consequently in decision-making.

5.2.3 Guidance for Children’s Trusts

In March 2010, two months before the general election which was expected to lead to a change of government, the DCSF published statutory guidance on Children’s Trusts, requiring each local authority to establish an inter-agency Children’s Trust Board to lead local children’s services (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2010). The guidance formalises governance arrangements, and again emphasises shared responsibility. The most commonly used term to describe inter-organisational collaboration in this document is ‘co-operation’: the
terms co-operate, co-operation or co-operating appear 147 times in 103 pages. This choice of language appears to suggest mutuality, rather than a drafting into the state’s agenda, or delivery on the state’s behalf.

The term ‘integration’, which recurred throughout the 2003 and 2004 documents, is much less common, occurring only 36 times. This resonates with the clarification that the guidance should not be interpreted as advocating a blurring of organisational boundaries. However, this does not entirely remove overlap and ambiguity, as is suggested in the quotation below, which affirms the overall leadership of the local authority at the strategic level:

‘The Children’s Trust Board does not create different lines of accountability nor does it blur or confuse existing lines of accountability. Each partner remains accountable for delivering...through their existing lines of accountability, and the local authority is additionally responsible for establishing the Children’s Trust Board.’ (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2010, p.48)

There is a distinction in this document between statutory responsibility and voluntary shared responsibility, which is evidenced in the document’s definition of two types of ‘partner’ within the Children’s Trust (paragraphs 22 and 23), with a clear distinction drawn between the responsibilities of statutory (public sector) and non-statutory (including voluntary sector) partners. While all are required to share responsibility, local authorities have additional responsibility to convene the Trust Board, and include partners (or not). Although the word ‘power’ is not used in this document, this conveys the impression that local authorities continue to be in charge.
5.2.4 Interim conclusions

In summary, this analysis of key Labour government policy documents 2003-2010 suggests an increased formalisation of voluntary sector engagement at the strategic level, but there is no clarity as to how the voluntary sector should be engaged in the partnership arrangements within and around the Children’s Trust, or guidance to public agencies as to how to facilitate this engagement. Although it is clearer in the 2010 document that there is a role for the sector in governance arrangements, with sector representation a requirement for Children’s Trust Boards, this clarification sits within continued ambiguity regarding accountability and responsibility. The voluntary sector is a non-statutory partner called on to co-operate with its statutory partners. It is to share responsibility, but there is no evident shift of power away from statutory agencies.

In the following section, I move on into the first two years of the Coalition government, to explore how the presentation of public and voluntary sector partnership in children’s services policy has developed over the period of the change of government.

5.3 A new partnership agenda? The early Coalition period

Prior to the 2010 election, the Conservative Party indicated their intention to review requirements for Children’s Trusts. Shortly after the formation of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government, processes and mechanisms introduced as the tools of integrated children’s service provision were withdrawn, including the ContactPoint database
(intended to hold details of every child), the requirement to produce an annual Children and Young People’s Plan, and the statutory guidance on Children’s Trusts (Evans, 2011). The government indicated its intent to remove the legislative requirement for cross-sector collaborative Children’s Trust Boards, and confirmed that each local authority should replace the Boards with locally determined arrangements. In spite of these changes, the website of the (again) re-named Department for Education (DfE) states that,

‘the core principle of a shared commitment to improve the lives of children, young people and families – enshrined in the Children Act 2004 section 10 ‘duty to co-operate’ – remains as important as ever’ (Department for Education, 2012b).

Key questions emerge from these changes which inform the analysis of policy texts from this period:

- Is there a change in policy on cross-sector collaboration, or simply a change to the form collaborative partnership will take as Children’s Trusts Boards are dismantled?
- How does policy present the role of the voluntary sector in any revised partnership arrangements?

These issues are explored below through analysis of key children’s services policy texts from the first two years after the general election.

5.3.1 Children’s services reviews

Two years into the term of the Coalition government (summer 2012), it is not yet possible to identify significant policy overviews, comparable to those analysed above, which indicate
medium term strategy for children’s services, and consequent implications for the voluntary sector. Instead, the government has commissioned and then responded to independent reviews, which begin to suggest the direction of travel for children’s services. In the following section, I discuss two of these reviews before presenting findings from analysis of the government’s responses.

The Allen (2011a) and Munro (Munro, 2011) reviews explicitly take a whole system approach, with implications for organisations from across children’s services. They draw attention to the two ends of the continuum of services for children and families: Allen focuses on early intervention supportive services offered when difficulties are first identified, while Munro focuses on child protection services for children who have been maltreated. Both reviews have wide-ranging implications for strategic leadership of children’s services, as well as for models of service delivery. More specifically, the reports of the Allen and Munro reviews both present perspectives on inter-organisational working with implications for organisations across sectoral divides.

Although they were commissioned by the Coalition government, these are independent reviews chaired respectively by a Labour MP (Graham Allen) and an academic (Eileen Munro). They make recommendations which can be accepted, modified or rejected by government, and must therefore be read alongside the government responses analysed below. Following the methodology outlined at the beginning of this chapter, I used NVivo software to search the review reports for terms related the voluntary sector and to partnership/collaboration, and to highlight relevant sections of the reports for further reading. Table 8 summarises key results
from the text search. Note here the prominence in the Allen Review of the Coalition’s concept of ‘Big Society’.

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<th>Allen Review</th>
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<td>Big Society</td>
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**Table 8: Key terms from text search of Allen and Munro reviews**

The Allen report proposes a new emphasis on early intervention and preventative services: this change is dependent on an approach which reaches across organisations and communities, including input from the voluntary sector:

‘To achieve real change, local areas will need to work together...to endorse, plan and fund an organisational and cultural shift towards Early Intervention from all those engaged in local service provision. The contribution of parents and carers and the voluntary and community sector is also very important. This must match and support the change in national priorities...’ (Allen, 2011a, p.46)

[There is] ‘a real opportunity to increase the...connectedness and integration of services for children and families....This is relevant to the wide range of services that provide support to these children and families...’ (ibid p.47).
In contrast, the Munro report primarily focuses on the state provision of child protection services, and the social workers employed to deliver those services. However, Munro also highlights the need for a range of services at the local level to meet the needs of children and families who are assessed as needing supportive rather than protection services. Munro’s emphasis is on the coordination of these services to provide a coherent local offer, and to achieve this, she recommends that government introduce an ‘early help duty’, requiring local authorities to secure sufficient early intervention services. It is in this context that the implications of the review for voluntary sector provision is clearest, although references to the ‘range of services’ do not specify who the providers might be. The voluntary sector is positioned as one amongst other providers of early intervention services, which should be secured and coordinated by local authorities.

Despite the emphasis in both reviews on the need for the engagement of all local services, there is no reference in the Allen report to Children’s Trusts, which were specifically created to bring local organisations together in a coherent partnership arrangement. Instead, the report draws attention to the role of new partnership arrangements introduced by government, Health and Wellbeing Boards. These will be,

`...well placed to focus on children’s public health outcomes and promote strong contributions from all local partners, both within the health field and from other organisations working to achieve the same outcomes...’ (ibid p.49)`
Munro does reference Children’s Trusts, but primarily in order to advise as to the alternative arrangements which need to be made as government removes the guidance for Trust Boards. She also indicates that Health and Wellbeing Boards could take over some responsibilities from Children’s Trust Boards, whilst also advocating the strengthening of another cross-sector partnership in children’s services, the Local Safeguarding Children’s Board. The principle of inter-organisational boards which provide strategic planning and governance to the range of children’s services continues then in these reviews, even though specific structures will change.

However, neither review report proposes a clear role for the voluntary sector in these revised collaborative arrangements. Instead, the sector is often obscured behind the phrases used to describe a ‘wide range of services’, ‘other organisations’. The sector is also often absent from the Allen report’s discussion of the importance of Big Society. In spite of the close relationship between the voluntary sector and Big Society policy outlined in Chapter 3, the report’s emphasis on the importance of the latter is not always accompanied by reference to the former:

‘Early Intervention is a Big Society project, which could unite public and private sectors behind achievable goals.’ (ibid p.4)

Allen is also at times less than positive about what he perceives as the voluntary sector’s past focus on competition for funding (ibid p.90). More positively, he recognises that the sector has historically had a large role to play in delivering early intervention services, and developing ‘ingenious ideas’ (ibid p.76) in collaboration with public agencies:
'There is a strong history of inventiveness in services for children in the UK. Many of the staples of today’s provision...were originated and developed by strong partnerships between the voluntary and statutory sectors.’ (ibid p.60)

The voluntary sector is presented then as a source of innovation and ideas, but also as a competitor for resources. Looking to the future, government should ensure that the sector aligns itself behind the review’s recommendations, bringing together the resources of all:

‘This is a Big Society commitment – we all need to work together to improve our future society and this commitment should be backed by relevant experts, voluntary sector and charitable organisations, and other interested parties.’ (ibid p.58)

Allen acknowledges that his recommendations require local government, but also ‘voluntary sector ownership’ (ibid p.110). At the local level, early intervention services ‘should be run by local authorities and the voluntary sector’ (ibid p.xvii), and at the national level, Allen recommends that the early intervention agenda is led by an independent Early Intervention Foundation: organisations from the voluntary sector should be included in the leadership of the Foundation (ibid p.xvii), and consulted in its ongoing work (ibid p.76). However, there is also a recognition in the report that there are barriers to an inter-organisational commitment to early intervention in the ‘institutional interests of established agencies’; ‘institutional arrangements’ must be developed which instead ensure that central and local government, the voluntary sector and carers ‘work together’ for children (ibid p.9). The report acknowledges that the costs of developing and evaluating services, and of implementing change, act as a disincentive to voluntary sector engagement in commissioning arrangements (ibid p.58, p.32).
Despite these barriers, Allen is clear that there is a role for the voluntary sector to play in the future of early intervention services, providing coherent services at the delivery level, but also participating in leadership structures.

The voluntary sector’s contribution to the leadership of children’s services is less visible in the Munro report (Munro, 2011). Here the emphasis is on the importance of coordinated delivery, and ‘effective working’, so that families experience coherent support from across different agencies (ibid p.30). Echoing Allen, the voluntary sector contribution is at the preventative end of service delivery, and therefore is not an explicit focus of this review of child protection.

Significantly, the sector is absent from the review’s discussion of the need for a learning culture in children’s services, which is presented as a concern for social services and its statutory partners, the police and health services. This contrasts with Allen’s emphasis on the historical significance of the sector as a source of innovation which has become embedded into public sector practice.

Below, I turn to analysis of the Coalition’s responses to these reviews of children’s services.

5.3.2 Government responses

Supporting Families in the Foundation Years (Department for Education, 2011c) incorporates government’s response to the Field, Allen and Tickell reviews as they relate to support for families with children who are under school age. Perhaps surprisingly, the term ‘Big Society’ appears only once in a direct quote from Allen. However, in this 89 page document, there are 48 uses of the term partner*, 9 uses of collaborat*, and 8 uses of the term co-production. This suggests a continuing affirmation of the need to work across organisational boundaries.
In an annex to the main document, a table summarises government’s response to the recommendations of the three reviews, listing actions taken, commitments made and future intent. However, there is little evidence here of a move towards the strategic and system level change which Allen suggests is needed to re-focus support to families on early intervention. The main text does acknowledge the need for system level change, but does not link this to the specific proposals of the Allen review.

The document affirms the significance of the voluntary sector role in service delivery: the early education and childcare sector is large and diverse, with ‘vibrant’ private, voluntary and independent provision (ibid p.10). Government will continue to promote this diversity, which is perceived as a source of ideas, growth and a ‘culture of innovation’ (ibid p.33). In addition, it envisages ‘a strong role for private, voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations’ (ibid p.68) in policy development. The report recognizes the expertise of many voluntary organisations in working with families, and the ability to engage volunteers in service delivery, and it acknowledges that parents will often turn to local voluntary and community groups for support and advice (ibid p.40).

Local authorities are presented as commissioners of services, ‘working to stimulate a local market of private, voluntary and independent providers’ (ibid p.71), and will be open to challenge under the recently enacted Localism Act (2011) if commissioning processes are not open to voluntary and community organisations. To ensure accountability for this commissioner/provider relationship, local authorities will be required to report to government on their spending through voluntary organisations.
However, the text presents the voluntary sector as more than a significant provider of innovative services in a diverse market place. It also indicates that the sector has a leadership role to play, specifically by contributing to policy development:

‘The voluntary sector has great potential to play a leading role in future and the government is committed to enabling VCS organizations to participate actively in policy making and implementation.’ (ibid p.72)

While local authorities will have responsibility for strategic planning, they must do this in partnership, ‘working with local partners through local children’s trust arrangements, including the voluntary and community sector’ (ibid p.71). This is described elsewhere in the document as a ‘process of co-production’ (ibid p.6), a process which is evidenced by the document itself, ‘developed with advice from a wide range of professionals’ (ibid p.6). The next stages of the co-production process include ‘the involvement of sector partners in the policy-making process at an earlier stage’ and ‘the creation of the right conditions for small businesses and voluntary and community organisations in the sector to thrive’ (ibid p.34). Departmental grants, together with the appointment of voluntary sector ‘strategic partners’ will provide a context for this process at national level, but mechanisms for oversight and governance of the co-production process at the local level are less clear. The document recognizes that Children’s Trust arrangements have been ‘influential in bringing together local services’ (ibid p.69), and looks to proposed Health and Wellbeing Boards to play a role in ensuring integration of services to meet local needs. However, it is unclear how this leads to practices of co-
production, or indeed what such practices might look like at the level of local service
development and provision.

In summary, *Supporting Families* presents a picture of diverse services for young children, in
which the voluntary sector has a significant role to play as a provider and innovator. In this
response to the commissioned reviews, government conveys a commitment to supporting and
extending the voluntary sector’s role in service provision, but also to ensuring that the sector is
able to contribute to policy making both nationally and locally. This is a much stronger
presentation of the sector’s strategic role than that which emerges from the Allen review to
which it is responding, but the document has little detail as to how this will happen at the local
level. Only two references are made to the Children’s Trust, and these use the loose
description ‘trust arrangements’, rather than advocating any specific form or forum in which
this contribution should be made: in line with government’s localism agenda, details are to be
determined at the local level.

The Coalition government published a separate response to the Munro inquiry (Department
for Education, 2011a), which accepts the need for a reviewed system, which focuses not on
organisations, but rather on the needs of children. This echoes the focus on children’s needs in
Labour’s ‘Change for Children’ programme. Re-focusing is presented as dependent on inter-
organisational, cross-sector collaboration (described as ‘partnership’), but the latter is also
closely linked to the economic environment:

‘Building a system centred on children and young people also means building even
stronger partnerships between government, local authority children’s services, the
voluntary and community sector, social work, education, police and health services. Given the tighter financial climate, it will be ever more important for the range of agencies involved in child protection to work together effectively to get the most out of resources.’ (ibid p.5)

Although encouraged by the review’s final report to take the fifteen key recommendations as a package, the Government response considers each separately (Department for Education, 2011a). Specifically, the response states that the proposed ‘early help duty’ called for by Munro needs further exploration before any move to legislate, although the wider principle of coordinated local services is accepted. The voluntary sector is presented as one of the partners with whom government must consult as they continue to develop child protection services in response to the review.

In summary, government responses to the Allen and Munro reviews of children’s services acknowledge the significance of the voluntary sector as a service provider, specifically at the preventative end of the continuum of provision. This provision must be coordinated with the provision of public agencies, to make sense for users, but also to ensure best use of resources. These responses emphasise that the voluntary sector is to be consulted as policy is developed for the longer term, as well as at the local planning level, using the term ‘co-production’ to indicate the collaborative nature of policy development, but giving little guidance as to how this might be governed at the local level. The structure and operation of collaborative partnership arrangements are to be determined locally, and despite recognition of the voluntary sector’s historical contribution to service development, there is no reference to its
potential contribution to the learning culture which is central to Munro’s proposals for the development of the children’s services system.

This suggests ambiguity in the way the sector is presented as a strategic partner, which is reinforced by the legislative framework for Health and Wellbeing Boards, presented throughout these reviews and government’s responses as providing future leadership for children’s services. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 established the duty of the Boards to ‘encourage persons who arrange for the provision of any health or social care services in that area to work in an integrated manner’, encouraging local providers to ‘work closely together’ (s.195). The emphasis is on the joining-up of service provision, rather than collaboration for the purpose of the inclusive development of shared strategy. The Act lists the required Board members, including senior local authority officers, representatives of health services and a new consumer organisation, together with ‘such other persons, or representatives of such other persons, as the local authority thinks appropriate’ (s.194). Although this leaves space for voluntary sector involvement at the local level, no such involvement is specified in the Act.

This absence of the sector from these new collaborative arrangements contrasts with the Labour government’s statutory guidance requiring voluntary sector representation on Children’s Trust Boards (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2010), and may be perceived as a backward step in terms of formal recognition of the sector’s significance at the policy and strategy level. This raises the question as to whether, in spite of the wider policy rhetoric of Big Society, in children’s services the role of the voluntary sector as a strategic partner is reduced under the Coalition government.
5.4 Policy for leadership of partnership arrangements

In order to directly compare policy from the two governments during the period of the study, I undertook a comparative analysis of two versions of statutory guidance related to the leadership of children’s services, the first (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009) from shortly before, and the second (Department for Education, 2012a) from after the 2010 change of government. Comparing and contrasting two versions of the guidance from before and after the election provides an opportunity to explore any changes in use of language, or of emphasis in relation to the voluntary sector. It brings to the fore the elements of change and continuity in the requirements for cross-sector partnership in children’s services, and increases understanding of the perceived role of the voluntary sector as a collaborative partner at the strategic leadership level.

These documents have the status of statutory guidance, and therefore must be followed by local authorities, unless they have sufficient reason not to do so: they focus on two key roles within local authorities introduced by the Labour Government in order to facilitate a ‘joined-up’ approach to children’s services - a councillor (Lead Member (LM)) and senior officer (Director for Children’s Services (DCS)) with responsibility to lead children’s services strategy, planning and provision in a local area.

Despite their shared title, the documents are very different, even in their physical appearance. The cover page of Labour’s 2009 document carries pictures of a lorry and a helicopter in the outline style of a book for young children; the text is in a rounded font, with the name of the
government department in small type at the bottom of the page. The stylised pictures, colours, and rainbow logo place this within a family of documents linked to the government’s Children’s Plan and Every Child Matters Change for Children programme. In contrast, the cover page of the 2012 update of the guidance carries a government coat of arms over the Department for Education’s name. The title appears in bold capitals in an angular typeface on the otherwise plain cover. This later document contains 10 pages of text, in contrast to the earlier version’s 35 pages. The discussion below focuses firstly on the presentation of the voluntary sector in the text, and then on the presentation of collaborative partnership arrangements for the leadership of children’s services.

Both documents were searched for the words voluntary, community or third, using all three words to cover the changing use of terminology over this period. This search identified 27 references in the 35 pages of the 2009 document, and 7 references in the 10 pages of the 2012 document. A thorough reading of the 2012 guidance identified that only one of these references specifically refers to the voluntary sector (others reference the wider community). This is a generalised statement that of the responsibility to include the sector at the planning, as well as delivery level:

‘The DCS and LMCS have a key role in ensuring that the local voluntary and community sector, charities, social enterprises, the private sector and children and young people themselves are included in the scope of local authority planning, commissioning and delivery of children’s services where appropriate.’ (Department for Education, 2012a, p.6)
In contrast, the 2009 document (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009) repeatedly emphasises the significance of voluntary and community organisations for the LM and the DCS. Five sources of further information about the voluntary sector are included in the list of information sources at the end of the document, and the description of the Lead Member role includes four references to the importance of ‘engaging’ the sector:

‘engaging and encouraging local communities and representative organisations...’ (ibid p.9)

‘political engagement...with local community organisations...’ (ibid p.9)

‘to be satisfied that there are processes in place to engage the private and third sectors as partners...’ (ibid p.11)

‘being confident that the local authority children’s services department has effective links with...appropriate third sector bodies...’ (ibid p.12)

The DCS is also described as being responsible for ‘engaging Children’s Trust partners, including, where appropriate, private and third sector organisations’, but this role goes beyond engagement to:

‘help strengthen cooperation across all services, including the public, private and third sectors, and embed their strategic objectives in the Children and Young People’s Plan.’ (ibid p.21)
‘The DCS should ensure that private and third sector partners are able to play a real and effective role at the strategic level...’ (ibid p.21)

The relationship is to be one which continues through the continuum of needs analysis, planning, delivering and monitoring services, with all partners expected to make clear their contribution to joint strategy expressed through the Children’s Plan. However, there is also an emphasis here on making the use of resources located in different sectors:

‘The DCS is accountable for ensuring that...resources from the local authority, other public agencies, the private and the third sector are identified;’ (ibid p.26, see also p.22).

In summary, in outlining the roles and responsibilities of the LM and DCS, the 2009 guidance suggests that the voluntary sector should participate in the development of strategy, based on shared analysis of needs, and consequently contribute to the delivery of that strategy, including through the commitment of resources. The most senior public sector leaders should take responsibility for this engagement at each stage of the process from strategy development, through planning, and the co-ordinated delivery of services. Although this principle is re-stated in the 2012 guidance, that statement stands alone without detailed guidance. This may relate to the context of the government’s wider policy towards local determination of service planning and delivery, as laid out in the Localism Act 2011, and the government’s commitment to reduce prescriptive guidance.
The text search also identified 44 references to partner(s) and partnership(s) in the 2009 guidance, and 7 in the 2012 guidance. The 2009 document introduces the ‘Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Bill’ which will place local Children’s Trust Boards on a statutory footing, and ‘give ownership of the plan to the whole partnership’ (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2009, p.5). In contrast, the emphasis of the 2012 updated guidance is on the freedom for local authorities to determine their own structures. These must be subject to test and review which takes account of the ‘adequacy and effectiveness of local partnership arrangements’ (Department for Education, 2012a, ibid p.5), although the partners listed here do not include the voluntary sector. Indeed, as indicated above, there is only one reference in the document to the voluntary sector, which is to be ‘included in the scope’ of local authority planning, commissioning and delivery (ibid p.6). This statement appears in the context of guidance to ensure participation and inclusion of children and young people as well as organisations across the voluntary and private sectors, but is hedged by the words ‘where appropriate’ (ibid p.6). Two more general exhortations are made: DCS and LMs should ‘work closely with other local partners’ to improve child well-being, and local authorities should work with (unspecified) partners ‘to promote prevention and early intervention’ (ibid p.7).

It is then difficult to draw any conclusions from the virtual absence of the voluntary sector from the 2012 guidance for Lead Members and Directors of Children’s Services about the nature of the cross-sector collaboration envisaged by the Coalition government. The guidance emphasises that local authorities, their officers and elected officials must work with others across sectors, but the form of any such arrangements is unspecified in this updated but reduced guidance. As suggested elsewhere in this chapter, it may be appropriate to place this within the context of the government’s wider localism policy.
In the discussion below, I will reflect further on the issues which emerge from the analysis of key children’s services policy documents over the period of the two governments during the last decade, and discuss implications for the voluntary sector.

5.5 Discussion - change, continuity, ambiguity

For Children’s Trusts, the change of government in 2010 marked a significant change in policy and practice, which has implications for the voluntary sector. As detailed guidance for Trust Boards was removed from government guidance, so too was the requirement for voluntary sector representation, which was specified in policy from 2007. Locally determined collaborative arrangements replaced Trust Boards (Department for Education, 2012b), and in these localised arrangements individual public sector leaders carry responsibility for ensuring voluntary sector engagement.

There is, however, no absence of themes of collaborative cross-sector partnership from the two major reviews of children’s services, which are analysed in this chapter. While local authority leadership of children’s services is reinforced, models of inter-organisational collaboration are presented throughout these reviews – from the project level, where Family Nurse Partnerships provide coordinated family support, to strategic partnerships (Health and Wellbeing Boards) between health and local government for the wellbeing of the local population. The Coalition government’s responses to these reviews emphasise decentralisation, local determination, and the responsibility of local authorities to coordinate
service delivery. This reflects the government’s localism agenda, but is also reminiscent of the responsibility of public agencies to commission and ‘work closely with’ other local organisations which was introduced in the initial Every Child Matters policy documents from 2003 and 2004. Indeed, the ambiguous language of ‘work with’ reappears in the Coalition’s responses to the Allen and Munro reviews.

Throughout the policy documents analysed in this chapter, the nature and form of collaborative partnerships is ambiguous and open to interpretation. These texts use a variety of different terms to describe collaborative arrangements – coordination, consultation, collaboration, cooperation, co-production, partnership: the distinctive meaning of each term and the relationship between them is not always clear. Are they different words to describe the same collaborative relationship, or do they have distinct meanings? An example is the apparent slippage in the Coalition government’s Supporting families document (Department for Education, 2011c) around consultation and co-production, which are used as if they are synonyms. However, these terms can be interpreted to suggest very different power relations between the state sector and its partners: while ‘co-production’ is suggestive of an equal partnership (Pestoff and Brandsen, 2008), consultation implies the government will ask other independent agencies their opinion of that government’s ideas and policies. Alternatively, this may be to read too much into the use of language, and the changes may simply represent the use of fashionable terms. The point here is to highlight the continuing ambiguity around the language of policy with regard to cross-sector collaboration.

However, there is a sense that the emphasis on service coordination, in the Allen and Munro reviews and government responses, suggests that other services should cohere around
renewed state services, offering help to those who are assessed as not in need of state provision. Here collaboration appears as a complementary, gap filling, relationship. The ‘early help’ duty proposed by Munro would require local authorities to ensure that services are coordinated to deliver a coherent package at the local level, but there is no clarity as to how local authorities might ensure that the voluntary sector, with its multiplicity of independent organisations, fills the gaps in state provision in this way. It is perhaps not insignificant that these documents link the concept of coordination to efficiency and limited resources in the current economic climate.

The Coalition government’s response to Munro suggests it is unlikely that a legislative ‘early help’ duty will be introduced, but accepts the principle of locally coordinated services. This perspective has potential implications for an independent voluntary sector. There is an assumption here that voluntary sector children’s organisations share purpose and values with the state such that they will contribute to coordination, bringing their services into a coherent local offer with state provision. However, while it may appear obvious that voluntary organisations share the state’s aim of ensuring all children are safe, it is less clear that all agree with the state’s priorities for the wellbeing of children and families, or share the government values which inform those priorities. Indeed, many voluntary sector organisations have historically campaigned directly against governmental interpretations of child wellbeing and family life, and models of service delivery. This raises questions as to whether the sector wants to be coordinated to complement state provision, or sees itself rather as a voice (or source of voices) from beyond not only the state system, but also the state discourse. If the voluntary sector exists to offer alternatives, to model different ways of providing support, to advocate
and challenge on behalf of those who are marginalised, then it will not easily be coordinated into state priorities.

The increasingly dominant discourse of coordination also raises the question as to who determines what a coherent coordinated offer should look like, and consequently highlights the importance of voluntary sector engagement in planning and policy making at both the national and local level. Yet, engagement in new local governance arrangements, including Health and Wellbeing Boards, is to be a matter for local determination.

Drawing on the policy analysis presented in this chapter, and the discussion of the wider context in Chapter 3, I suggest that voluntary sector organisations within the children and families field will find themselves in a context of policy, power and politics which highlights competing ideas and discourses about the sector, with implications for sector identity. If the voluntary sector is understood as existing as a result of state failure, filling the gaps in state provision, then the coordination of provision across sectors as a coherent offer makes conceptual sense. However, if the sector understands itself primarily in terms of its role to advocate and challenge on behalf of the marginalised, it will seek to contribute to policy, and to the determination of priorities at the strategic level, to influence the configuration of provision not simply by adding its own provision to that of the state, but also aiming to change what the state itself does to support children and families.

Previous commentators have suggested that there is a continuum of progressive inter-organisational engagement in collaborative partnership towards integration (Horwath and Morrison, 2007), but my analysis of the voluntary sector and of state policy suggests that
different, and apparently competing, forms and discourses of collaboration may coexist, as the sector continues to assert its values and independence. For example, a voluntary sector organisation may manage a service which is closely coordinated with a service managed by a local authority, whilst at the same time seeking to influence that local authority to change its priorities and deliver services differently. Thus, collaborative relationships exist not simply at different levels, but crucially at multiple overlapping levels, so that even while voluntary organisations cooperate with the public sector in coordinated service delivery, they also challenge public sector policies and practices, at the same time taking opportunities for consultation, and pushing for involvement in decision-making. Although changing policy may emphasise one aspect of the collaborative relationship, whilst using terms which are frequently ambiguous in their meaning, voluntary sector organisations may need to manage the cross-sector relationship at each of these levels simultaneously, rather than moving sequentially from one level to another. At the same time, the sector continues to resist absorption into the state’s agenda. Leaders in the sector must manage the cross-sector relationship at these different, potentially competing, levels.

Crucially, beneath these collaborative arrangements and practices, there exists a power relationship which voluntary sector leaders will want to both negotiate and challenge. The policy analysed in this chapter is silent on the power relationship between sectors, nor does it acknowledge the different values which may inform in-sector aims and priorities, and consequently present a challenge to cooperative relationships and coordinated provision.

This analysis raises important issues for the research questions. Most immediately, it draws attention to the challenges of operating in a context bounded by continually updated national
policy which is frequently unclear and ambiguous in its positioning of the relationship between public agencies and the voluntary sector. It highlights the difficulties of practising collaboration in a context where it is unclear whether the sector has a place at the strategy table or not. It raises questions about what it means to act from within or on behalf of an independent voluntary sector, when leaders of public agencies are required to ensure that services from all sectors offer coordinated and coherent provision for children and families.

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed key policy documents from the last decade of children’s services, in order to explore implications for the voluntary sector and its leaders. Moving through the Labour government’s Change for Children programme to the implementation of Children’s Trust Boards, on into the Coalition government’s emphasis on local determination of partnership arrangements, and the need for local coordination, the policy story is multi-layered, complex and at times apparently contradictory. For voluntary sector organisations and their leaders who seek to influence public sector priorities and practice, this is at best bewildering, as they determine how to engage with one set of collaborative arrangements, only to find these quickly overturned, or in apparent competition with, or contradicted by a different part of the system.

However, it may be that this fluidity of collaborative arrangements in children’s services provides opportunities for the voluntary sector. With an increasing acknowledgement that risk and uncertainty cannot be removed from work to support children and families, there is a
corresponding emphasis on learning and adaptation in the children’s services system.

Although the voluntary sector is not mentioned with regard to the acknowledged need to develop a learning culture in children’s services, the recent (2011-12) focus of policy on learning may provide an opportunity to contribute to the recognition of alternatives, and to challenge the norms and expectations of state services, and the principles which underlie them.

Finally, it is clear that, even as Children’s Trust structures are dismantled, government commitment to inter-organisational cross-sector collaboration remains, as Local Safeguarding Children’s Boards are strengthened, and Health and Wellbeing Boards are introduced. While the former includes a clear role for voluntary sector representation, the latter have no seat for the sector. Yet, there is an expectation that services must be coordinated to meet the needs of children and families in the local community. Policy then continually poses a challenge for voluntary sector organisations, as the sector delivers the services it believes are needed, partnering with state provision, whilst many sector organisations simultaneously continue to challenge public sector service models, priorities and policy.
Chapter 6:
Findings (2) – Interviews and Observation

6.1 Introduction

This chapter moves from the examination of national policy to the exploration of individual practice and sensemaking, within a context which is continually impacted by that policy. This exploration draws on the interviews, observations, and collection of local documents described in Chapter 4, presenting the findings of analysis through two different analytical lenses. Firstly, I present the findings of thematic analysis of interview and observation data, before going on in the second part of the chapter to present findings from analysis of participants’ use of metaphor. As described in the methodology chapter, the aim is to produce a ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of the experience of collaborating across sectors, and consequently to uncover meaning, and explore sense-making, in order to address the research questions. This ‘thick description’ is built up through the layers of findings reported here, and in the previous chapter, and on into the Discussion in Chapter 7. Each element of findings contributes to the overall picture which emerges through this layered approach, as each piece is placed into the patchwork quilt.

In isolation, each of the themes introduced below provides some insight into the experience of partnering. They draw attention to participants’ understanding of the cross-sector partnership context and its dominance by the public sector; to their belief in their own ability to make a difference; and to the actions they take in cooperation with other voluntary sector leaders.
Together, these themes begin to uncover the complex space in which partnering happens, and the challenges which arise for voluntary sector leaders.

The table below introduces nine inter-related themes which emerge from analysis. Six themes reflect four key dimensions of collaboration which emerge from this study – the cross-sector dimension, the interpersonal dimension, the intra-sector dimension, and the individual dimension. Each of these dimensions is significant in understanding the complexity of the inter-organisational relationship. Three further themes focus on ‘making it happen’.
The cross-sector dimension:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>Dependency and Control</th>
<th>Focuses on the perception that the public sector is in control of cross-sector partnership, whilst the voluntary sector is both ‘partner’ and dependent.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2</td>
<td>Decision-making and Transparency</td>
<td>Focuses on perceptions that decisions continue to be made within public sector agencies, rather than jointly by all partners, and that information sharing is limited.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3</td>
<td>Strategic Partner or Contractor?</td>
<td>Focuses on whether there is a role for voluntary sector participants to contribute to strategy development, or whether they should focus on the role of contractor.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interpersonal dimension:

| Theme 4 | Relationships | Focuses on participants’ assertion of the significance of working relationships with key individuals to the work of partnering across sectors. |

The individual dimension:

| Theme 5 | Agency | Focuses on participants’ assertion that they as individuals are able to make a difference in the work of partnering across sectors. |

The intra-sector dimension:

| Theme 6 | Acting Together – Cooperation and Competition | Focuses on participants’ experience of collaborating with others from with the voluntary sector, in order to collaborate across sectors. |

Making it happen:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 7</th>
<th>Leadership Style</th>
<th>Focuses on the approach participants take to leadership, their preference for a facilitative style, but acknowledgement that a more directive style is sometimes necessary.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 8</td>
<td>Influence</td>
<td>Focuses on how participants influence their public sector partners, highlighting the interplay between formal elements, such as partnership boards and meetings, and the backstage informal elements of partnering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 9</td>
<td>Partnership as Conversation</td>
<td>Focuses on the concept of cross-sector partnership as an ongoing conversation, in which a change of language, of the focus, or quality of conversation is itself an achievement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9: Themes from interview and observation data
These inter-related themes suggest that the experience of partnering is both challenging and (all too often) frustrating. As I introduce these themes, I explore how each surfaces apparently contradictory aspects of partnering – the structural and the interpersonal, formal and informal, inclusive and exclusive, dependent and independent, and most significantly the experience of both ability and inability to make a difference. Together they point to two further issues which are significant for the enactment of collaborative partnership in the context of this study. Firstly, they highlight the significance of power in cross-sector collaboration as a thread which runs throughout the data, and secondly they raise questions about the identity, purpose and role of the voluntary sector in the context of cross-sector collaboration. These issues will be explored further in the discussion chapter.

In the first part of the chapter, I describe each theme, presenting illustrative data from interview texts and observations. As described in the methodology chapter, I present the data in two forms. Firstly, short quotes from interview data provide examples of participants’ concerns and views as expressed in informal interviews. Secondly, narrative examples of practice also illustrate the themes, but focus on enactment, bringing together what participants say with what they do, or drawing comparisons across interview texts. This presentation of data contributes to the development of thick description.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the additional insight revealed through exploration of interviewees’ use of metaphor. As indicated in the methodology chapter, exploring data through metaphor – including similes, figurative and picture language – provides an additional analytical lens through which to uncover participants’ meaning. Specifically, this approach
provides insight into participants’ experience of cross-sector collaboration, and of the sense they make of this experience. Analysis of interviewees’ metaphors identified four thematic categories which are introduced in Table 10 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metaphor 1</th>
<th>Games, Circus Acts and Funfair Rides</th>
<th>Metaphor which pictures the partnering experience as a roller coaster ride is contrasted to that which compares the experience to a game or circus act.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor 2</td>
<td>Insider/Outsider</td>
<td>Suggests that the partnership space is experienced by the voluntary sector leader as <em>both</em> insider and outsider.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor 3</td>
<td>Multiple Worlds</td>
<td>Closely linked to the insider/outside theme, metaphor explored in this section represents the voluntary sector leader as looking towards and responding to different realities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor 4</td>
<td>Space and Containment</td>
<td>Metaphor focuses on the experience of the partnership space as tight or loose.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 10: Participants’ metaphors**

The chapter ends with a brief discussion of emergent conclusions from this exploration. In the Discussion Chapter which follows, I place the findings of this analysis, and the policy analysis of
Chapter 5, back into the context of the study, further developing thick description, and in order to explore implications of the study for practitioners.

6.2 Findings from thematic analysis

6.2.1 The cross-sector dimension

Theme 1: Dependency and Control

This theme highlights interview participants’ perceptions of the constraints on voluntary/public sector collaboration in a context where public agencies are authorised by the state to deliver children’s services, required by public policy to manage this within specific structures, and hold many of the financial resources to achieve this end. The theme draws attention to the dependence of voluntary sector organisations on these public agencies for resourcing, sustainability and continued service delivery, and to participants’ perception of the impact of this dependency on the broader inter-organisational relationship. This leads to the portrayal of an unbalanced, or unequal partnership, in which the cross-sector inter-organisational relationship is defined and controlled by the public sector. Consequently, this relationship is subject to the continual changes of public policy, which in turn lead to increasing frustration on the part of voluntary sector partners.

Interviewees explored the nature of the collaboration in which they are engaged, questioning the appropriateness of the commonly used term ‘partnership’ to describe a relationship in
which one partner holds the resources and authority of the state, whilst the other is dependent on those resources. Despite the policy rhetoric of co-operation, engagement and consultation, public agencies control not only resources, but also the structures and processes of public/voluntary sector collaboration, with inevitable impact on the inter-organisational relationship:

‘I always think about partnership work as being on an equal footing, and actually the reality is that there isn’t, because they give us – we’re reliant on them, 70% of our funding comes from them. So, it’s not partnership in the true sense.’ (Ellie)

Participants describe how apparent moves towards more collaborative systems all too often end with unilateral public sector decisions. This is ‘all graciously done’, but at the same time ‘done surreptitiously’ (Sonia). As a result, they frequently present the experience of engagement in cross-sector partnership as one of considerable frustration, over which voluntary sector partners have little control, as illustrated in the description below:

‘...it’s been talked about for years, and seem to make change, you all sign up to this process, and everyone’s quite motivated, and then it has a bit of a dip... And then you pick up again because there are signs that might lead to better commissioning, and then the outcome is just going to be – hideous, quite frankly. .. I don’t know how [the sector representatives] maintain their, you know, their kind of enthusiasm for everything partnership-wise. It’s just quite incredible.’ (Fiona)
Fiona’s description of the experience of partnering illustrates the focus of this theme on public sector control, with the voluntary sector subject to continual changes determined by the public agencies and policies. There is recognition then that the nature and future shape of cross-sector partnership lies in the hands of the public sector, and yet also evidence that some participants continue to believe that cross-sector collaboration can be different, more equal, more of a partnership – if the public sector so determines:

‘I think we’re on the cusp between the voluntary sector being welcomed in as an equal partner...or actually having the door slammed shut in its face, saying we’ll call you when we need you, go away and wait.’ (Ian)

In summary, the theme of Dependency and Control highlights the imbalance in the partnership between public and voluntary sectors. Control of resources, processes and policy sits with the public sector agencies, which consequently determine the nature, trajectory and boundaries of the collaborative relationship. Participants present voluntary organisations as dependent on public sector resources, working within partnership space determined by the structures and policies of the public sector, and they suggest that the future of cross-sector partnership lies in the hands of public sector agencies. This focus on public sector control relates closely to the second theme which focuses on decision-making in cross-sector contexts.

**Theme 2: Decision-making and Transparency**

This theme draws attention to the absence of joint inter-organisational decision-making from cross-sector partnership, despite the rhetoric of public policy. It highlights participants’ views
that decisions are made by public agencies outside of partnership meetings and structures, and then brought back into the partnership context for information and implementation.

Observation of public partnership boards supports the views expressed by interviewees that decisions are rarely made at this level. This suggests that (in terms of collaboration) decision-making is a backstage operation, which happens out of sight of formal collaborative partnership meetings. Indeed, the data highlight limits, not only on decision-making, but also on information sharing, which in turn highlight disjunction between an apparent commitment to openness and transparency, and the experience of practice which is more opaque. This is not necessarily a matter of intent, but may often be accounted for by unintended consequences of public sector processes and structures. However, this element of cross-sector partnership practice appears to reduce opportunities for voluntary sector participation, and consequently to silence the voluntary sector voice.

This theme highlights the limitations of partnership meetings, working groups and boards, which are presented in policy as key mechanisms of collaboration. Despite the growth in such meetings (discussed in Chapter 3 above), and the consequent growth in opportunities for sector representation, participants suggest their presence has little impact on determining the direction of local children’s services. This is illustrated in the quote below from one leader who has decreased his involvement in these groups, due to his perception that decisions are made by public agencies ‘without a great deal of reference to the voluntary sector…’:

‘… you can raise questions, you can raise concerns, but I don’t feel that my being at that particular group or level has made a lot of difference, really. On the odd occasion,
you might find that there’s something where you can challenge or get some
information taken on board, but that’s pretty rare.’ (Colin)

Thus, partnership meetings held in public are perceived as ‘rubber-stamping’ (Trudy) decisions
made within the internal structures of the local authority. These decisions are then handed
down to cross-sector teams for implementation:

‘It was very much the council took strategic decisions, then those were fed back
through... what you get is you are fed crumbs, or you’re making the best out of a plan
that you aren’t necessarily agreeing with, or on board.’ (Helen)

In public partnership meetings I observed for this research, decision-making was rarely evident,
and it was often unclear to me how and where decisions were made, other than to confirm
that, in partnership terms, decision-making appears to be a backstage operation, which
happens out of public sight. At times, public sector partners expressed a wish to be open, but
explained that they were constrained by legal or processual constraints. This can lead to the
almost simultaneous expression of commitment to transparency and the withholding of
information, as evidenced in one voluntary sector network meeting described in the example
of practice below.
Collaborative practice: information sharing

The representative of a public agency attending a voluntary sector led network meeting stated he was unable to comment on a particular issue for reasons related to legal process. A second representative at his side confirmed that it was not possible to discuss this issue. A voluntary sector participant proceeded to report the issue as she understood it from the perspective of her own organisation. Once the issue was spoken out in this semi-public context, and a view expressed from the voluntary sector side, the public agency representatives made brief comments, but the information came from the voluntary sector side. The network members were requested to keep the information confidential until officially released, with an explicit request to the researcher not to break this confidentiality.

(Reconstructed from Observation Notes)

Box 6: Example of collaborative practice 1

This example draws attention to the way in which the systems and processes of the public sector world often appear to work against open and transparent collaborative relationships across sectors. This is experienced by voluntary sector leaders, even in the context of meetings where they participate as invited sector representatives, as was illustrated in the observation of three successive Children’s Trust Board meetings described below.
Collaborative practice: Board meetings

Prior to the first meeting, I was invited to join my contact from the local infrastructure organisation and the sector representative, Julie, at the local coffee shop for a pre-meeting. Here they reviewed the proposed agenda for the Board meeting, which had been forwarded by the local authority. They agreed it was difficult to know where in this agenda there was an opportunity to contribute on behalf of the sector. They finally suggested one possibility, and we proceeded to the meeting, which I observed, sitting alongside my contact in the public area. Julie made no verbal contribution to the meeting. At the end she made her way to the back of the room to explain that she could identify no useful place to speak on behalf of the sector.

At the second meeting, the voluntary sector representative raised a number of questions, and made points which led to extended discussion. However, none of these were recorded in the minutes produced prior to the following (third) meeting, and as a consequence the issues raised were not followed up through matters arising. Despite the chair’s initial response to one issue that ‘we should look at this next year’, the concern did not exist in the official record. Following the ‘matters arising’ item on the agenda, the representative commented on the absence of her comments from the record, and the chair asked for these to be included in the future. The minute taker noted that she had no details of individuals participating in the meeting as representatives, only of those who were local authority councillors and officers. She would need these details in order to attribute comments.

(Reconstructed from observation notes)

Box 7: Example of collaborative practice 2
This example of practice highlights the way in which public sector processes may limit the engagement of the voluntary sector, paradoxically working to silence voluntary sector voices, even when these voices belong to invited sector representatives. Despite that invitation, no one had amended public sector processes focused on local authority officers and councillors, in order to take account of the presence of representatives from outside the system: the agenda was set by the public sector, the record maintained by the public sector.

In summary, this theme highlights the limitations of the public sector invitation to the voluntary sector to participate in collaborative partnership, by focusing on the lack of opportunity for voluntary sector partners to engage in joint decision-making. It highlights ways in which public sector systems and processes may have the apparently unintended effect of precluding the sharing of information, and excluding the voluntary sector voice.

**Theme 3: Strategic Partner or Contractor?**

This theme highlights that on one hand participants believe that the voluntary sector has a strategic contribution to make, and on the other hand they understand that it may be more productive to focus attention on the commissioner/contractor element of the cross-sector relationship. The data highlight the different approaches participants take in response to these competing perceptions. While there is a reluctance to be perceived simply in the contractor role, some participants welcome the clarity which is brought to the cross-sector relationship through the more detailed specification of a contractual relationship, while others regret increasingly tightly specified commissioning, and its impact on the inter-organisational
relationship. While this theme relates to the dependency of many VCOs on public sector funding, which is introduced in theme 1, it is distinct, in that, rather than focusing on the resource relationship, it draws attention to beliefs about and understanding of the distinctiveness of the voluntary sector. Participants assert that the sector has a distinctive contribution to make at the level of strategic planning, a contribution which relates to their identification of the sector as being in touch with communities of interest and place more closely than public agencies.

As explored in Chapter 3 above, the inter-organisational partnership concept in children’s services encapsulates ideas about both the joint development of strategy and the outsourcing of service delivery through commissioning. Hence, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that there is some difficulty separating participants’ discussion of collaborative partnership as the shared strategy, prioritization and development of new approaches to service delivery, from their discussion of the commissioner/contractor relationship. Participants recognise that participation in strategic partnership meetings can lead directly to new business opportunities commissioned from their organization, but they also believe that the voluntary sector has a unique perspective to bring to the partnership table:

‘I think we come with a different perspective, a different understanding and I believe you know, often more in touch with services users, so I think we can bring a different perspective, and influence the way services are developed and commissioned.’ (Colin)

During the period of this study, changes in the structures and processes of the cross-sector relationship increasingly highlighted the commissioning aspects of collaboration. In the
context of the UK economic recession and public sector cuts, participants speak about increasingly formalised tendering processes, with contractual requirements tightly specified by finance specialists, rather than children’s services specialists. Many local authorities have re-designed or disbanded their Children’s Trust Boards, replacing them with structures focused on commissioning, where participation is limited to budget holding organisations, thus excluding the voluntary sector:

‘We used to have three sets of governance. First of all [a] forum, which comprised about 35 people on a sort of consultative basis – these would be from police, health, voluntary sector, faith sector and so on – and obviously the commissioners. Secondly, the young people ...and thirdly, the commissioning executive, which probably at the time had about 10 people including me. They’ve changed that to have a commissioning executive of only those people who’ve got finance, funding, bags of money...’ (Ian)

Participants continue to seek ways to input at the strategic level, to contribute to the future development of services and determine priorities, but acknowledge that building on this public sector focus on commissioning may be more productive, at least in the short term:

‘It might be that what we should be doing is looking at the commissioning round, getting really involved in a review of that...Because that, you know, feels quite tangible....And, you know, what I would be aiming to do would be to kind of talk to the Council officers about where, you know, beyond just an overview of it and people ok giving a few comments, you know what I mean. Is there any room for engagement in
it, whether it’s through commissioning, or? Ideally, I don’t think it should be through commissioning, you know, I think it should be shaping it, but it’s a bit of a struggle to kind of, and I have to say – having been in this kind of partnership working for a long time, I do have some cynicism…’ (Katrina)

Although most participants in this study expressed concern about the increased focus on VCOs as contracted agents implementing public policy, with less opportunity for strategic influence, others welcomed a tighter commissioning process - if they were able to contribute to the development of that process:

‘…when we first started it was very very loose. We had a set of outcomes?, targets?, just a set of statements, I don’t know what you’d call them, saying, you know, this, this and this…[a new manager] put much more clearly defined targets, clearly measurable targets. Prior to that it wasn’t, it was very loose…And we were very involved in drawing those up. We actually had meetings, and we put proposals to them [the local authority], gave them what we thought would be good criteria.’ (Helen)

However, several participants spoke about how their hopes for a collaborative approach to commissioning, with greater participation in the commissioning process, and consequently increased business for the voluntary sector, had been disappointed, as in the example below:

‘[it’s] just a classic case of ‘we need to commission differently’; ‘we need to have more voluntary sector provision’ was the message, ‘we need to recognize the voluntary sector’s got expertise in these areas’…And then, push comes to shove, not prepared to
make any redundancies, don’t want the unions on our backs, unlikely to change, and worse than that, you know. The agencies who’ve been contracted will probably still be contracted, but on reduced funding.’ (Fiona)

The reduction of the cross-sector relationship to the contractual is perceived to have a detrimental impact on the voluntary sector as a whole, tending towards the maintenance of the status quo, and the reduction of diversity:

‘…the public sector certainly just wants to commission, as it were, and ideally, very often, the legal procurement people want to have single contracts, and that militates against a vibrant, diverse voluntary sector.’ (Ian)

Thus, participants continue to attempt to maintain voluntary sector input at the strategic level, continually reasserting the importance of contributing a distinctive voice into the partnership, which is separate from funding negotiations. At the same time, they retain an awareness of the relationship between engagement in strategy and commissioning. As illustrated in the quote below, this leads to an awareness of the continual tension between the need for funding and the desire to make a strategic contribution.

‘I think there’s always a risk the voluntary sector gets put in a service provision being commissioned role. I think that’s too narrow. I think we have a role, an expertise, a responsibility, to feed in to what you might call strategic thinking...It’s nothing to do with whether we end up getting any money particularly – not that we can ignore obviously, the need.’ (Eric)
This theme focuses on the engagement of many participants at both strategic and contractual levels. It highlights the tension between the desire of voluntary sector leaders to contribute at the strategic level to the direction of children’s services, and their belief that they may be more effective by focusing on the public sector’s priority of commissioning, and trying to influence at this level. On the positive side, focusing on a collaborative approach to commissioning can lead to increased business for the voluntary sector and a clearer contractual relationship. More negatively, focusing the collaborative relationship on commissioning, potentially impacts on any sense of voluntary sector voice. The cross-sector relationship is reduced to a series of separate contractual arrangements which require VCOs to comply with criteria which they have been unable to influence. Consequently, maintaining collaborative partnership at the strategic level is a continuing priority for many participants.

6.2.2 The interpersonal dimension

Theme 4: Relationships

This theme draws attention to participants’ emphasis on the importance of interpersonal relationships to cross-sector collaboration. In interview texts, participants frequently highlight their relationships with key individuals in the public sector, often initiated either in cross-sector meetings, or through joint service delivery. They nurture initial links made in this way, and use them as opportunities to attempt to influence the public sector, and to benefit their organisation, its mission, and at times the wider sector. As a consequence, there can be a falling off in the inter-organisational relationship when key individuals change role. The theme
draws attention then to the promotion of organisations and their mission through working relationships, potentially resulting in increased business and strategic opportunities. However, it also points towards the potential risks of relying on interpersonal relationships for the development and sustainability of inter-organisational collaboration.

In response to the challenges and difficulties which participants encounter in the cross-sector dimension (see themes 1-3), they turn to relationships formed with key individuals from public agencies to attempt to exert influence, raise concerns, and identify opportunities. These relationships often begin in partnership meetings, working groups, or shared service delivery, as illustrated in the quote below:

‘Obviously, we hope to get more business out of the contacts that we make...I think it’s relationship-building, you know I’m a firm believer that in – that a lot of the business that you actually acquire in our sector is because people like you, trust you, want to work with you. You know, we were talking about this earlier on with a couple of managers, and I think that it’s important to invest time in building those relationships. And often, it’s the conversations after the meeting that will lead to something happening more than the things that happen during the meetings, you know. And if you’re not there, meeting people who have got the influence, and, you know, then you’re going to lose out. So, I think it is relationship building probably is one of the key factors for me.’ (Colin)

This aspect of collaborative partnership appears to favour those who have built up relationships over long working experience, during which trust has developed. Trying to work
in partnership with an individual who is unknown to you, can take long months of research and persuasion:

‘...you’d be working on an individual for months and months and months, trying to figure out what is their self-interest, what is the things that is going to move them to come and be a part of this, and what do you hold them accountable for.’ (Keith)

However, one participant explained the recent development of a project in terms of an instant connection with a colleague from the public sector:

‘I had a really good discussion...and in fact we got on so well’. (Ellie)

This participant attributed the agreement to work together to develop her organisation’s proposed project entirely to the connection between her and an individual manager made at a first meeting, suggesting that the project might not have proceeded had she met with a different manager. This is explored further in the narrative example of collaborative practice below.
**Collaborative Practice: Ellie’s story**

Ellie described a meeting with a public sector manager, who she was hoping to convince to support, financially and strategically, a pilot project to demonstrate the value of her organisation’s intervention with vulnerable families. During the course of the meeting, the manager, Jean, explained to Ellie that her staff had concerns about an aspect of the organisation’s practice. Ellie understood that the manager repeated these concerns to her only because they ‘got on so well’. She decided to face the issue with staff, focusing on this issue in a planned staff development sessions, and consequently requiring staff and volunteers to adjust organisational practice.

Ellie is going ahead with the pilot project, drawing on existing organisational funds. Jean has required assurances of quality standards, and additional training for staff and volunteers, in return for her stated support, and the practical support of her local authority team. She is providing no funding for the project.

Ellie hopes that the ongoing working relationship between the two teams, built on her own relationship with Jean, will lead to positive outcomes for the future – including funding.

(Reconstructed from interview and field notes.)

**Box 8: Example of collaborative practice 3**
Ellie presents this story as evidence of how her public sector contacts are enabling her to grow her organisation, but the implications of this scenario quickly move beyond the interpersonal. Interpreted from the public sector perspective, this story might be understood as an example of a local authority manager successfully achieving her desired outcomes by drawing Ellie into the public sector agenda, not through formal commissioning processes, but through this backstage meeting, and without any financial implication. Jean achieves quality improvement to existing provision, and additional service development, without any new funding allocation. This raises the question as to who is influencing who in this scenario.

Ellie herself acknowledged this ambiguity. After the interview, with the tape switched off, she continued to reflect on this meeting, and acknowledged that although she initially described her conversation with Jean as ‘honest’ due to Jean’s expression of her team’s concerns, she herself had not reciprocated by sharing her own team’s views of social workers. Thus, she qualified her initial presentation of an open and transparent relationship with her public sector colleague and the impact on her organisation. This emphasises the links between the theme of interpersonal relationships and the issue of transparency explored in theme 2.

In conclusion, this theme focuses on the interpersonal dimension of the work of partnering across organisations and sectors. It highlights participants’ understanding of the significance of their working relationships with key individuals from across sectors. These relationships may begin in public meetings, but continue backstage through less formal meetings and one-to-one

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16Although the recording had ended, the participant expressed a willingness to continue the conversation and for her views to be used in the research.
conversations. However, examples provided in this section illustrate the two-way and at times ambiguous nature of these relationships.

6.2.3 The individual dimension

Theme 5: Agency

This theme highlights participants’ assertion that they believe that they as individuals are able to make a difference to and in the work of partnering. This ability is not linked in the data to individual skills or personality, but rather to experience and knowledge, which also lead to an awareness of when to accept that it is impossible to influence public sector agencies and policy, and therefore, when to challenge, and when to be silent. Specifically, participants link their ability to make a difference to three factors – firstly, as outlined in theme 4, to the relationships they actively develop with key individuals in the public sector; secondly to their knowledge and experience of the systems and bureaucracy of the public sector; and thirdly to their understanding of issues faced by communities of interest and place. This last factor relates to their strong identification with the values and purpose of their organisation, and of the wider sector.

These three factors are brought to the partnership table by individuals, and enable them to contribute to the shape and direction of the collaborative relationship. This is particularly evidenced by those with long-standing experience of working alongside and (previously) within the public sector. These individuals can be observed moving between building on relationships with individuals they have known and worked with for years, and making use of their inside
knowledge of public sector processes and systems to pursue their agenda, drawing on their
knowledge of the community. This is illustrated in the example below from Colin, who worked
as a manager in the local authority before moving across to a role in the voluntary sector which
partners with that authority:

‘I think what you, I suppose the way I see it, is that you bring your experience your
knowledge, and your understanding of what the sector can actually deliver and
contribute. And I think, to me, working with families, what I can see is that a lot of
families experiencing difficulties could benefit more from support from third sector
organisations, you know, whether that be a small local mother and toddler group, or
whether that’s an organisation that employs qualified social workers to do family
intervention. I do feel that what I can get across is that local authorities need to
understand better the role that we can play in helping them to understand the
problems that they face.’ (Colin)

However, the same three factors can be identified in the interview texts of relative newcomers
to collaboration with the public sector, although they may be less successful in accessing all
three. For example, Donna described her attempt to engage the local authority in
development of a new community project. Frustrated by inability to access the public sector
system, of which she has little understanding, she turns to local officials who she knows from
her personal engagement in the local community, and to her own standing in and knowledge
of that community, which derives not from her current post, but rather from family
background. Like Colin (above) and Ian (below), she concludes that the work would not have
happened without her contacts and knowledge. Consequently, she attributes the successful implementation of the project to her own involvement:

‘Without wanting to blow my own trumpet, if I hadn’t done it, it wouldn’t have got done...[it depended on] my positioning.’ (Donna)

However, these examples also suggest a possible darker side to this theme, pointing to the potential consequence of individuals’ sense of their own significance to the progress of the work. This emerges in my interview with Ian, who had a long career at a senior level in the public sector before moving to the voluntary sector. Ian’s assertion that ‘it does all depend on me’ led us to discuss how the organisation will replace him when he retires. He concludes that the organisation may not survive his retirement, and is likely to merge with another VCO:

‘To answer your question, I think that what would happen would be that when I come to go, which at most would be two and a half year’s time, I could see that happening, because I think it would be quite difficult to find somebody who has got my experience and knowledge of local government, public sector world, together with knowledge of the voluntary sector world. It seems to me to be quite valuable to have both experiences.’ (Ian)

This raises the question as to how participants go about the work of partnering in contexts where they do not have the experience and knowledge described by Ian and Colin, nor long-standing relationships to build on, as also described by Donna. The example of Charlotte, in a context which is completely new to her, shows how she retains her belief that she can make a
difference in the unknown world of public services, but recognizes the need to move slowly whilst she builds her knowledge:

‘I think that in my mind I always thought that if I thought of the role as research and being a researcher, like action research, then it, as long as I am recording and storing some of this somewhere it’s going to – and as long as I’m not setting out to do any harm – it will have an impact, you know, whether that’s the impact we imagined it would have.’ (Charlotte)

More positively, this theme illustrates how belief in the potential to make a difference can sustain continued engagement in partnership work, as well as highlighting the satisfaction which can accrue to the individual. There are opportunities to engage at a strategic level, with privileged access to information, which are often unavailable to managers at a similar level in large public agencies. There is also a large degree of autonomy, and satisfaction in the perception that the individual can have an impact:

‘You make your own role...I might be some use.’ (Sonia)

The significance of key individuals from the voluntary sector to cross-sector partnership is acknowledged by colleagues from the public sector. Participants interviewed for this study who now work in the public sector acknowledged the impact of key champions, and the difference such individuals can make. Where the contribution of an individual to partnership is perceived as positive, this contribution becomes associated with the individual’s organization
and cause, thus outliving the period of an individual’s engagement, as described in the example below:

‘In the voluntary sector in general, I think, that often you get passionate committed people who are very, you know - they have things they want to change, they are movers and shakers in the local community, they really are. And often, they set up an organisation because of the need, you know, and, you know, those organisations have all been around a while, so there have been changes [in leadership], you know, but they’ve developed an ethos, and a sort of a place I guess, and a way of working.’

(Rachel)

However, there is also a reverse side to this association of the individual and the cause. When individuals from the voluntary sector are perceived negatively by public sector colleagues, there can be an impact on public sector perception and understanding of the issues they bring to the table:

‘[Public sector leaders] might think “God, not them, they are so negative”. It may be said that they are bringing their own story to the table, rather than acting as reps.’

(Julia)

Voluntary sector participants also understand that, while there is satisfaction in their belief that they can make a difference, there is also an element of risk. This is illustrated in the example below, where Ellie, after speaking about her isolation in her role as facilitator
between the public sector and her own organization, talked about her sense of responsibility and associated vulnerability, as she tries to negotiate a way forward between the two:

‘If it does go wrong, it’s down to me, so whatever we do decide to do, I do need to agree with it, because the bottom line is if it goes wrong, it’s my fault.’ (Ellie)

In summary, the theme of agency draws attention to the individual dimension of collaboration, evidenced in participants’ belief that they, as individuals, can make a difference in the world of cross-sector collaboration. They assert that this ability is based on knowledge, experience, and relationships (linking with Theme 4), and consequently draw attention to the significance of longevity in and around the two sectors. This in turn highlights the challenge faced by VCOs when experienced, well-connected individuals move on or retire, and draws attention to the potential challenges of working with public sector systems and processes for those who are not familiar with this world. This suggests there are risks in the association of an individual with a particular cause or issue.

6.2.4 The intra-sector dimension

Theme 6: Acting Together – Cooperation and Competition

In contrast to the emphasis on individuals and one to one relationships in themes 4 and 5, this theme draws attention to the ways in which voluntary sector leaders come together to act collaboratively in voluntary sector led networks, for the purposes of facilitating cross-sector collaboration. These networks are facilitated within the sector, in order to share information,
and increase the potential for impact on the public sector: they support leaders in the sector, but also facilitate access to new business opportunities for their organisations. These business opportunities arise due to access to information, but also access to key individuals attending network meetings from both sectors. Thus, in-sector collaboration appears to facilitate cross-sector collaboration, through the interpersonal dimension. However, this theme also highlights the tension which arises between in-sector collaboration and competition between VCOs, and ways in which voluntary sector leaders manage this tension. Consequently this theme’s focus on ways in which leaders from VCOs work together, also highlights similarities and differences between VCOs and issues of sector coherence.

The participants in this study engaged in voluntary sector networks which enable the development of sector voices which would otherwise be unheard. These networks both develop shared ‘voice’ for the sector, and promote the multiple ‘voices’ of smaller organisations and community interests, which may otherwise be marginalized and excluded from the public sector’s agenda. Public sector officers and elected representatives are often invited to attend meetings, and speak about their policies, and in return are expected to listen to views from the sector. Thus, voluntary sector networks act as a form of accountability, where officers, councilors and even MPs are asked to account for their policies, and listen to the views of VCOs in a semi-public forum. Participants acknowledge the efficacy of working together in this way:

‘I think increasingly, we are trying as a sector, we are trying to link up with other organisations...so we can say, look, you know, you’re not just hearing the voice of one
organisation you’re hearing the voice of a number of us, a group of us that feel we can really make a difference to improve the lives of families.’ (Colin)

The value of this network approach is also acknowledged by public sector officials who regularly accept the invitation to attend and share information, and may provide funding to support the management and development of the network. One public sector interviewee reflected on the greater coherence that can result from this approach:

‘I also think you know, there’s been really constructive and good work both by [the network], and by the organisations within that partnership to, you know, to look at these issues, to look at things, like you know, working in partnership, rather than – collaboration rather than competition. To look at, you know, how to hold this disparate, sort of mishmash of organisations – from large nationals, to tiny mostly volunteer led.’ (Rachel)

Moves away from in-sector competition, and towards shared approaches to bidding for funding, are welcomed by participants in both sectors. The development of bidding consortia enables voluntary sector organisations to ‘scale up’ in order to participate in public sector commissioning processes, which they otherwise find daunting, or where they are unable to fulfill commissioning criteria alone. Examples of formal bidding consortia were described by participants in this study as new forms of in-sector collaboration, which enable voluntary sector organisations to compete with public agencies and the private sector for service delivery contracts. In the course of the study, two new consortia were observed to successfully win public sector contracts, changing the balance of service delivery within the local authority area
towards the voluntary sector and away from public sector delivery. In addition, this process changes the public agency view of the sector:

‘The council, I know, were impressed that the voluntary sector got its act together to be in a position to compete.’ (Ian)

However, participants acknowledge that there are dangers associated with in-sector collaboration which is focused on facilitating cross-sector collaboration. Firstly, there is a danger that networks are absorbed into public sector systems and priorities, so that they no longer provide a distinctive forum for the voluntary sector, but instead are seen to provide legitimacy for public sector agencies, as described below:

‘We used to run this group...it felt very much as if it drifted, like they couldn’t influence [the local authority]. It was really a point where [the authority] came to say that they’d consulted with the voluntary sector.’ (Katrina)

In addition, examples of cooperation in bidding are rare, and participants spoke about the fact that they were more often competing for funding with other voluntary organisations, even while cooperating together on other issues. One interviewee described the continual potential for competition as introducing an element of discomfort into his relationships with the leaders of other VCOs. When funding opportunities arise, this discomfort can become outright competition:
‘Past experience tells me that as soon as anybody thinks there is any money around they will elbow each other away and say, ‘I’m first, I’m first’. (Ian)

Participants are aware that the interests of the sector and the interests of their own organisation are sometimes in competition. This was evident in discussion of sector representation on partnership groups and boards, which is frequently managed through sector networks and infrastructure bodies. Elected representatives are alert to the potential for tension between representation of the whole sector, and opportunities to promote their own organisation’s interests:

‘I think I do feel that leadership role for the sector that you carry when you are in partnership meetings. Although you know there is that tension between your own organisation and the sector.’ (Colin)

One participant from an infrastructure organisation outlined their inclusive approach to electing and managing sector representatives, but also acknowledged that sector representatives inevitably increase the opportunities for profile and business for their own organisation. Access to these opportunities forms a part of the motivation behind an individual’s willingness to take on a representative role for the whole sector:

‘...you can have a positive impact on your organisation in terms of raising its profile, and your name, and building relationships, and all that stuff...there has to be something in it for the rep and their organisation, as well as doing the work on behalf of the sector.’ (Fiona)
This theme highlights the role of in-sector collaboration, in the form of networks, consortia, and mechanisms for sector representation, but also draws attention to the multiple levels of relationship between VCOs and their leaders. This may lead to simultaneous cooperation, in order to speak with one voice to public sector agencies, and competition for funding held by those agencies. It also highlights the tensions for individuals who both try to speak on behalf of the sector, and to promote their own organisation. In-sector collaboration can facilitate cross-sector collaboration, by developing sector voice and bidding opportunities, yet at the same time, the commissioning elements of partnership working, and potential business opportunities, can lead to fierce in-sector competition for limited funding. Such competition can lead to the positioning by unsuccessful bidders of successful organisations as the opposition, rather than as collaborators in a shared cause.

Participants in this study are aware of the potential damage this can cause, and explain their attendance at in-sector networks partly in terms of their commitment to avoid such competition, or at least mitigate its effects. This was illustrated by one participant who explained to me the reason for her recent presentation at a voluntary sector network meeting in these terms: funding for her role had been achieved at the expense of others in the room:

‘...there was a lot of misunderstanding about the role and coming into that forum, and the money for my role had come from the local council, and so some of those organisations were very anxious about the fact that could have gone to their projects...’ (Charlotte)
In-sector networks can provide an opportunity to restore understanding and cooperation between VCOs, but some participants question whether the sector is able to cooperate sufficiently to develop a shared sector voice, which can speak to and potentially challenge the dominant public sector:

‘They say at the Children and Young People’s Trust that they want the voluntary sector to put things on the agenda, so it’s partly about the strength of the voluntary sector... the, I don’t know if it’s the right word, but the coalescence of the sector. How coordinated they are, and how resilient they are.’ (Katrina)

Thus, this theme of in-sector collaboration again draws attention towards the issue of voluntary sector coherence and identity. Paradoxically, working together, for the sake of coherence and significance, may highlight differences between VCOs – those with distinctive values, which are not held by all; differences between larger and smaller organizations; those in receipt of funding, and those who are not – by choice or not; those led by volunteers and those led by staff. One interviewee suggests that the former seem to disapprove of the latter ‘almost on moral grounds’, drawing attention to the occasionally strident tone of the debate.

However, it is also interesting to note here that participants are aware that sector coherence is not only an issue for the voluntary sector. They recognize that the public sector is made up of many agencies and departments, which can be in disagreement or competition with each other, as illustrated in the example below:
'The project] was all about partnership working within the council departments and with others. There was huge in-fighting just about who prepared the document. I remember sitting in one meeting where there was an argument because they had six bullet points, and the other team had four bullet points – that kind of level... who was perceived to have more influence, and who was more important...' (Helen)

In summary, this theme focuses on the engagement of voluntary sector leaders in collaboration with other sector leaders in networks and joint funding bids. Engagement in these networks provides an opportunity for increased understanding, access to information and funding, as well as the development of shared sector voice in order to influence the public sector. At the same time, this theme highlights the complex nature of such collaboration, as leaders protect the interests and concerns of their own organisation, quickly moving from cooperation to competition, where they consider this to be the appropriate response to public sector funding opportunities. Voluntary sector networks may provide a context for leaders to address complexities of coherence and competition, and to find a way to cooperate together to contribute to the cross-sector partnership world through the development of sector voice, but this is by no means a comfortable experience, or easy achievement.

6.2.5 Making it happen

Theme 7: Leadership Style

This theme focuses on participants’ approach to leadership in the collaborative context, in regard to their own teams, the work of partnering, and leadership of the voluntary sector. It
highlights a consistently stated preference for an approach which is facilitative, and consensual, rather than authoritative, across these three contexts – team, partnership and sector. Although participants use different terms to describe their preferred style of leadership, these all focus on including and engaging others, rather than telling them what to do. As leaders in the middle, between communities and the public sector, they see themselves as facilitators of engagement with and between both. Consequently, this theme contrasts with the focus on participants as individuals who make things happen (theme 5), and instead focuses on facilitating others to make things happen. However, the data also highlights constraints on this approach to leadership, within the structures and processes of public sector led collaboration, which leads to the adoption of a speedier more pragmatic approach, when time and resources do not allow for a facilitative approach.

Participants’ state their commitment to an approach to leadership which empowers others, as they highlight the importance of participation, inspiration and the transformative purpose of leadership:

‘...that inspiring side, so getting people on board, getting people to recognise a vision for themselves...and then getting people to work towards that vision...we had to say, ‘get on board, come with us on this journey’, very much all about leadership, and getting people to achieve things together.’ (Helen)

Participants variously describe leadership in the context of cross-sector collaboration as ‘facilitation’, ‘role-modelling’, ‘conduit’ and ‘consultancy’, and emphasise the need for an approach which is based on continual learning, specifically from communities of place and of
interest. These terms highlight participants’ perception of their position in partnership work as between communities and the public sector, engaging with both, and developing routes into and between both worlds. One participant describes how he engages with politicians, building on his continued engagement in a local community through his role in service delivery:

‘If you don’t understand what’s going on on the ground, you don’t understand what issues people are interested in...that keeps me rooted...’ (Keith)

Another participant suggests that a more confrontational approach may be potentially risky in partnership work, because it undermines the collaborative principle, and sets agencies and communities against each other:

‘...an adversarial style won’t work – it leads to a constant defining as different. In other words, there must be a commitment to a partnership approach.’ (Eric)

This comment illustrates the perceived importance of maintaining the role of co-operative collaborator with partner agencies. However, data from observations suggest that individuals do adopt a more confrontational approach to address specific issues. This was seen in meetings where voluntary sector leaders adopted an adversarial style to address a particular concern, or advocate for the voluntary sector, quickly returning to a more cooperative and facilitative style once the meeting moved on to a different topic. In addition, participants acknowledged that sometimes there is no time, or resources, to develop a more consensual approach. Leadership in the context of collaboration sometimes requires willingness to get on with the job in circumstances which are not ideal, ‘sort of being positive and moving on’ (Ian).
This leads to a judgement as to when to encourage the engagement of others, and when to lead from the front:

‘I want them to lead it...and I’ve just had to do a complete U-turn on that as a strategy, and say, actually, if I don’t do it...’ (Charlotte)

The tension between the commitment to leadership based on facilitation and empowerment, and the perceived reality of ‘moving on’ is illustrated by Keith’s description of his work to bring politicians and community activists together.

‘We’re asking people, what would you like to...Part of it has to be, part of it should be driven by the people who are engaging with it, so if we do that, it makes them feel like they’re more involved. But then, part of it, because sometimes resource-wise, you’ve just got to plough on, you know.’ (Keith)

In summary, this theme suggests that participants prefer a consensual empowerment approach to leadership in the partnership context, but will pragmatically adopt a more proactive style in response to circumstances, and the ends they aim to achieve. This pragmatic approach reflects their awareness of power differentials, and an assessment of what they can practically achieve, given they have no formal authority in the context of cross-sector collaboration, and access to limited resources.
Theme 8: Influence

This theme focuses on how voluntary sector leaders influence the public sector, in the context of the dependent relationship introduced above (themes 1-3), where public sector partners draw on state resources and the authority of the state, while voluntary sector partners apparently come to the table with few resources and little potential for leverage. Voluntary sector leaders in this context have no formal authority, or hierarchical position to draw on, in order to make a difference to the direction and priorities of the partnership. The theme highlights both how and on what basis participants seek to influence public sector strategy and priorities, and exert influence, within these limitations. It relates to themes above which highlight the limitations of meetings, the lack of joint decision-making, and the significance of inter-personal relationships, but draws attention specifically to the sources and processes of influence.

The data suggests that influence is achieved not by abandoning the formal side of collaborative partnership for the informal, but rather by taking account of both formal and informal elements. Making things happen in the partnership world originates both with formal public sector dominated processes and policy, and with issues which arise informally from the local community. Voluntary sector leaders respond to and take account of both of these: they then continue to use both formal and informal routes to get things done and exert influence. They use formal partnership meetings, sector representation, and local authority systems, alongside informal backstage working relationships to make things happen and make a difference to public sector strategy and practice.
Two key factors then can be identified in participants’ attempts to exert influence and contribute to leadership in the partnership context, where they have no authority over the partners at the table. Firstly, they present themselves as responding to an understanding of the needs of communities (of interest or place) served by their organisation:

‘Very little in my experience...happens effectively because it has been ordained from on high. A lot happens effectively because someone cares, because it’s been generated locally.’ (Ian)

Secondly, they present themselves as responsive to public sector policy, priorities, and gaps in service defined by those priorities. They adjust service priorities, and modify service delivery models in response to public sector policy and priorities. This leads to tension between priorities identified through assessment of need located in the community, identified and promoted by community activists and voluntary sector workers, and priorities defined by the public agencies which control resources. In the example below, Ellie describes how a public sector move towards a more targeted approach to service delivery is impacting on her organization, which previously provided a service to anyone who came forward from the community. This leaves the organization with a difficult decision – should they continue with their open access approach, which the public sector will no longer fund, or move towards a targeted approach in response to public policy:

‘we’ve certainly not made any judgements about whether somebody deserves it...But the reality is, funders want services to be targeted to specific families with specific problems.’ (Ellie)
Maintaining this dual positioning – responsive to community, responsive to policy – involves ongoing engagement with multiple stakeholders, in the community and in public agencies. One interviewee comments that to keep everyone on board, ‘I have to do lots of stroking’ (Ian). This again relates to the informal interpersonal dimension of partnering, which is the focus of theme 4, but also to the relationship between the public elements of partnership work and that which happens out of sight, which emerged earlier in the chapter in the discussion of that theme. This interplay between the public and the backstage can be observed through examples of collaborative practice, which place interviewees’ stories into the wider context. Two examples are presented below.

In the first example, Ian describes how he moves from the influence he regularly exerts on the local authority, backstage through his longstanding relationships with senior managers, to influence exerted via the processes of the local authority, drawing on complaints procedures, committee structures, and national government guidance. Ian is aware of the need to maintain relationships with managers who have power to deliver or withdraw support to his own organisation and the wider sector. At the same time, he assesses that he must respond to the concerns of other leaders within the sector, particularly as he holds the role of elected sector representative.
Collaborative Practice: Ian’s story

Ian is a manager of a voluntary sector organisation which provides support to other voluntary youth projects; he has also been sector representative on the Board and other partnership groups during his four years in post. As a former senior manager within the council, he builds on his extensive network of former colleagues, and knowledge of council processes, to gain access to senior officers:

‘...this morning at half past eight I was with the Assistant Director of Services to Young People, so he is actually sort of second in charge of the children and young people’s department, and the thing he said to me, as I was going out, was that I had influenced him substantially in quadrupling the size of the voluntary sector contribution within his service.’

When the council makes a decision which is unpopular with other voluntary organisations, Ian must decide whether to oppose the council, risking his status as co-operative former colleague. He makes his challenge, not through his working relationship with senior officers, but on the basis of process (‘not being contract compliant’), and is able to draw attention to the issue, with the consequence that the decision is re-considered through a high-level council committee:

‘The challenge for me was would I make, if you like, a complaint to the County Council about the process - the lack of time, not being Compact compliant and the content of what was being done. We did and we got some things changed. In my experience which is extensive, you never win every, the whole of every battle, but we did make some significant changes. So much so, the issue was actually called in by the Select Committee, and we appeared before the Select Committee to argue against the Cabinet decision... So, we are influential, if not powerful.’

(Reconstructed from interview texts and field notes.)
Rather than addressing the issue informally by expressing his concern to his former colleague, Ian chooses to write a letter of complaint, which leads to the issue being addressed through a high level council committee, which has the authority to require that the decision is reconsidered. Consequently, the issue is moved from the backstage to the public arena. Ian takes a risk in taking this approach, as he has built his organisation’s relationship with the public sector through his relationship with local authority colleagues on the basis of his identity as former colleague. In his interview he describes how he has worked with these colleagues to introduce public policy to the voluntary sector. He also describes the tension between his accountability to his infrastructure organisation’s voluntary sector members, and to the council which funds his organization. He frequently identifies himself as former local authority manager, yet in the circumstances of this scenario, he identifies himself with the voluntary sector, risking that public sector colleagues re-cast him from his role as former colleague and towards a role where he may be understood as in opposition to the council.

Ian does not tell me the final outcome of this challenge, but is positive that the issue is raised to a high level of the council, thus bringing to the fore his voluntary sector colleagues’ concerns, and increasing the possibility for continued funding to the sector. At the same time, he is also able to present the issue as an opportunity for public sector colleagues to achieve their aim for a more effective and efficient service. Thus, Ian continually moves between alignment with his public sector partners and alignment with his voluntary sector colleagues, and between the backstage of working relationships, and the frontstage public elements of council life, in order to achieve his aim to influence the local authority.
In the further example of practice below, Florence similarly demonstrates her ability to move between the front and backstage of partnership working. Florence manages to maintain a tone of co-operation with local authority representatives, even whilst expressing the sector’s opposition to the authority’s recent distribution of funding. The example again highlights how influence is exerted through a combination of the formal, and the informal out of sight negotiations between leaders from each sector.

**Collaborative Practice: Florence’s story**

In a voluntary sector network meeting, Florence quietly warned leaders present from public agencies that they could face a legal challenge from a number of voluntary sector groups, due to a recent funding decision. The meeting returned to the co-operative, even friendly, tone of the earlier discussions across participants from both sectors, and the issue was not referred to again.

At the following meeting of the Children’s Trust Board, no reference was made to this issue, either by the voluntary sector representatives, or local authority councilors or officers, even though the decision was now in the public domain.

At the next network meeting, Florence said that she knew participants would want to know the outcome of her challenge. She proceeded to tell the group that additional funding had been found to address the issue raised, and discussions were proceeding with the local authority regarding the allocation of this funding. Aside from the initial challenge, all of this had been achieved ‘backstage’, beyond the reach of formal minuted meetings and representative systems.

(Reconstructed from observation notes.)
In this example of influence successfully exerted over the public sector agency, I observed the interplay of backstage and frontstage working, which had been presented in interviews, through the network meetings. However, the consequent funding allocation (tens of thousands of pounds) was made behind the scenes between meetings. The intervention at the network meeting appeared to be due to the determination of one individual to raise the issue in the hearing of other colleagues, without moving it formally into the public arena, though threatening to do so. However, in a later interview, a colleague described how the intervention had been planned between key individuals in the network. This leverage was sufficient to ensure that the issue was addressed and retained at the semi-public level of the voluntary sector network, rather than being surfaced in formal partnership meetings held in public. Following the report to the second network meeting, the funding decision was incorporated back into local authority discourse, and can be found in public documentation as a part of the wider initial decision.

In both Ian’s and Florence’s stories the opportunity to influence comes through two factors working together – long-term engagement in the work of partnership boards and working groups and the relationships developed around this engagement, together with a change in local authority priorities (the result of policy changes, politics or economics). Ian and Florence have both engaged in the long-term development of collaboration, both in the public arena, and beyond the public arena through working relationships and the establishment of mutual respect. This provides the collaborative context for them to challenge their public sector colleagues when their priorities are seen to be in conflict with voluntary sector interests and values. Thus, in Ian’s story, there is interplay between the long-term partnership which he
establishes with former colleagues, and his knowledge of public sector processes, which he successfully makes use of in order to raise his issue to a high level within council structures.

Thus, the examples of practice introduced in this section suggest that influence is exerted at the point at which there is interplay between the ‘backstage’ of working relationships, with decisions made in offices behind public spaces, and the ‘frontstage’ of local authority processes and public priorities. Relationships at the interpersonal level, together with formal processes and policy priorities, frame the space for action which is more than is achieved through formal partnership meetings alone. They suggest that influence is achieved not by opting out of partnership processes and policy priorities into the backstage world of the interpersonal, but rather by holding the backstage in relationship with these frontstage elements. In summary the theme of Influence is seen in the interplay of the formal and informal elements of partnering, as individuals move between elements of partnering which are behind the scenes and elements in the public domain. Influence is achieved through engagement at all of these different levels.

**Theme 9: Partnership as Conversation**

This theme draws attention to the micro-processes of cross-sector partnering. Participants compare collaborative cross-sector partnership to an ongoing conversation, in which they seek to improve the quality of the engagement, and to change the language. This understanding of partnership as a continuing conversation presents a picture of cross-sector collaboration as manageable and achievable at the micro level. Conceptualizing collaboration in this way
legitimizes continuing engagement in processes which can otherwise appear closed and inaccessible. It points to the way in which impact and meaning may be created at the level of conversational interaction, whether in public or behind the scenes, rather than simply through public policy.

In the example below, Keith describes how he conceptualizes the voluntary sector led forum which he facilitates as an opportunity for a managed conversation, both within the sector, and with representatives of public agencies. The conversation must be participative and engaging, providing opportunities for story-telling, as well as opinions. This ultimately has an impact on practice:

‘How do we create a forum whereby ordinary people and activists and community leaders and charity leaders can have conversations...? And invite [public agencies] to be part of that – so it was, on the one hand, yes to applaud [public agencies] where we think what they are doing is good, while on the other hand being, to be critical...It’s actually as we connect, and collide and brush up that we hear other people’s stories and get challenged by them, other people that we meet, that hopefully our practice is sharpened by that – both at an academic level and also at a practical level in terms of what we do.’ (Keith)

This conceptualization of partnership as a space for transformative conversation, which can safely include challenge, suggests that even small changes of language and consequently of ideas and practices might constitute achievement. This is further evidenced in the example of collaborative practice outlined below, which draws on separate interviews with three
voluntary sector representatives to a Children’s Trust Board. Each separately described the presentation of a significant paper to a local Board meeting, and their assessment of the impact of the paper.

**Collaborative Practice: The Reps**

Three voluntary sector representatives to a Children’s Trust Board were interviewed individually. They had together submitted a paper to the Board, on behalf of the local voluntary sector, which outlined an alternative model of service development and delivery. This opportunity occurred in the context of the council’s apparent willingness to consider alternative services models, due to the need to make cuts in expenditure. They described how the paper was carefully edited into a format and length which the representatives judged would give the paper the best chance of being read by the busy Board members. This work was done in their own time. The representatives suggested that the paper was well received, but had not led to changes in terms of local authority policy, nor had it impacted on decisions about resource allocation.

Each representative expressed frustration that there are unlikely to be changes in public sector practice, despite their belief that such changes could lead to financial savings for the public sector. However, one representative suggested there is ‘perhaps a change of language’, later adding that a key to partnership is ‘the quality of the conversation’.

(Reconstructed from interview texts.)

**Box 11: Example of collaborative practice 6**
This example of collaborative practice highlights the representatives‘ different assessment of the impact of their paper. It raises questions about what impact participants might expect from this type of intervention into cross-sector partnership meetings, and whether a change of language or quality conversation is considered an acceptable or reasonable achievement by those participants.

These two illustrations of partnership as conversation highlight two issues for further exploration. Firstly, they suggest that there may be opportunities to change the language, and consequently the discourse of collaboration, which appears elsewhere in the data to be dominated by public policy. Secondly, they draw attention to the possibility of making an impact at the micro level, through the continued micro-processes of partnering, the exchange of stories, observations and different perspectives, and the presentation of alternatives. These issues will be explored further in the discussion chapter.

6.2.6 Interim Conclusions

The themes identified in this chapter each suggest something of the challenges and difficulties which face voluntary sector leaders who participate in cross-sector collaboration, but also of the opportunities and motivations which keep them engaged. Each theme describes a different aspect of these challenges and opportunities, but this is not to suggest that every participant encounters these in the same way. Instead, the illustrative quotes demonstrate the different responses of individuals to these challenges and opportunities, and the frequent ambiguity of those responses. Individuals recognize the competing demands upon them – for
example between representation of the sector and its interests, and advocacy for their organisation and its interests. Thematic analysis highlights some of the ways in which they respond to and make sense of these demands:

- They draw on their own experience and knowledge of both sectors.
- They express belief in a distinctive voluntary sector contribution to cross-sector collaboration.
- They develop and draw on working relationships with key individuals.
- They cooperate with others in the voluntary sector.
- They draw on community links and knowledge.
- They prefer a facilitative, empowering leadership style, but pragmatically adopt a more proactive and confrontational style, depending on circumstances.
- They influence public sector partners by drawing on both the formal and the informal aspects of partnership work.

These themes also draw out a number of ways in which participants begin to make sense of their challenging role as partners. Firstly, despite the apparent dominance of the public sector and dependency of VCOs, they tell themselves that they are able to make a difference, and believe that they can make a role for themselves, even where they have no formal authority. Secondly, they continually manage competing demands through compromise, trade-offs, and at times the adoption of apparently contradictory behaviours and perspectives. These will be explored further in the discussion chapter.
By using a combination of interviewee quotes and narrative examples of practice to illustrate these themes, I have presented the views of participants, but also re-contextualised those views back into the context of collaborative processes. Narrative examples of practice capture a series of actions, drawn from interview and observation data, or compare the stories of several interviewees, or different perspectives expressed within individual interviews. They show movement – between formal and informal, backstage and frontstage, highlighting competing interpretations and sometimes apparent contradictions which support, and also at times challenge, the views expressed in interviews. They add to the thick description of collaboration by focusing on what participants do, as well as what they say, highlighting similarities, inconsistencies, and the development of views and actions.

Together the themes presented here draw attention to the way in which collaboration through interpersonal working relationships, which often occurs behind the scenes, interacts with the public local authority-led partnership processes (eg. partnership meetings, complaints mechanisms, committees), and with policy priorities. Voluntary sector leaders do achieve influence in collaborative contexts, but they do so in a space which is bounded and continually shaped by relationships, processes and the priorities of policy. Narrative examples of practice draw out the interaction between the separate themes, and consequently begin to suggest that cross-sector collaboration is not a static, public sector defined space, but rather an amorphous form, in which dynamic interpersonal relationships interact with the continually changing priorities of policy, and public sector dominated processes.

This interaction is evidenced in several interviewees’ accounts, in which they indicate that they are prepared to adopt at least some public sector priorities and take them back to their own
organisation. For example, Ian suggests that his ongoing relationship with public sector colleagues is based partly on his willingness to encourage voluntary sector colleagues to adopt public sector policy and priorities, where appropriate. This suggests there is a continual process of adaptation – aiming for influence from the voluntary organisation to the public sector, then in turn taking public sector priorities back to influence the voluntary sector – a process which is mediated through interpersonal relationships. This illustrates the different dimensions of collaboration noted in this chapter, but also points towards the relationship between these dimensions.

The thematic lens focuses and re-focuses attention on different aspects of the experience of partnering, on the views expressed by research participants, and the actions they take in collaborative contexts, to maintain and develop the partnership, promote organisation, sector and cause, and achieve a measure of personal job satisfaction. Before moving on to further discussion of the issues which arise from these findings, I will add to this analysis by adopting a different lens to look at interview data through participants’ use of metaphor.

6.3 Findings from metaphor

Below, I present four themes from analysis of the metaphors used by participants in interviews, highlighting similarities and contrasts. This analysis provides insight into the sense that individuals make of the experience of partnering, their feelings about this experience, and the relationship between the individual and the complex space in which collaboration happens. Together, these inter-linked metaphors contribute to the picture of the experience of cross-
sector collaboration from the voluntary sector perspective as demanding, risky, and uncomfortable. Table 10 in section 6.1 above summarises these four themes.

It is important to note that the use of metaphor is not evenly spread across interviewees. Some participants use metaphor much more frequently than others. The aim here is not to generalise, but instead provide insight into individual experiences and perceptions through this further exploration of the interview texts. For these reasons, the discussion below should be considered exploratory, and the suggested interpretations of metaphor as emergent rather than conclusive. They contribute to the wider interpretation of the data, rather than standing alone.

6.3.1 Themes in metaphor

Metaphor 1: Games, Circus Acts and a Funfair Ride

The metaphors discussed in this section compare the experience of collaboration to the playing of a game, or performance of a circus act. These highlight the individual’s contribution to the outcome – to the result of the game or the quality of the performance; they are suggestive of the exhilaration and adrenalin of performance, but also the risk. In contrast, the metaphor of the funfair suggests that the individual steps onto a ride, which is out of her control, though there is again a sense of exhilaration in this picture.

Several interviewees speak of their experience of the work of partnering as a game of skill and continual motion:
'I can play the short game...or I can play the long game...’ (Ellie)

‘I’m competitive on behalf of who I’m playing for.’ (Ian)

‘... [I’m] keeping the ball rolling.’ (Donna)

‘It’s all balancing balls.’ (Charlotte)

‘I kind of jumped...’ (Helen)

This active game requires flexibility and skills, which is compared by one participant to those of a circus act, with the corresponding level of risk:

‘It does feel a bit like going on a trip-wire, going on a high wire rather, a tight-rope, with a big drop either side. As I do actually have vertigo, I think that’s a real difficulty.’ (Ian)

These metaphors of skill are in contrast to another interviewee’s comparison of cross-sector collaboration with a funfair ride, which is beyond the control of the individual - an experience which pursues its relentless course:

‘it’s really roller-coastered over time... You think you’re making progress, and then it goes like that again, and then there’s a bit of an upturn, and then it goes like that again.’ (Moves her arms up and down to denote ‘roller coaster’ ride,) (Fiona)

While both tightrope walking and riding a roller coast are potentially exhilarating, the former depends on the skill of the individual, while the latter describes a situation over which the rider
has no control once on board; the former has an element of individual performance, while the latter suggests that the individual is passive. The roller coaster will stay on track, the experience will be thrilling or possibly terrifying. Yet Fiona notes that individuals continue to take the ride, just as Ian continues to face the challenge of the tight-rope in front of him, in spite of his feelings of vertigo. The positioning of the tight-rope, like the direction of the roller-coaster, and the rules of the game, are all beyond the control of the individual.

These images echo suggestions in the thematic analysis that the work of partnering is experienced as both dependent on the individual (‘all dependent on me’), and at the same time beyond the control or intervention of individual partners. Interviewees appear to live with these seemingly incompatible experiences of collaboration, both believing they can make a difference if they are incredibly skilful and committed, and at the same time acknowledging the control and dominance of the public sector. Along the way, they may encounter fear and anxiety, as well as the adrenalin of performance.

**Metaphor 2: Insider / Outsider**

Interviewees’ language also suggests that cross-sector partnering is experienced by voluntary sector leaders as both an ‘insider’ and an ‘outsider’ experience. Metaphors related to the insider/outsider concept appear in the texts in two different ways. Firstly, there is association and disassociation with metaphor used to describe the public sector – this use of metaphor suggests ‘I am inside and therefore like them’, or ‘I am outside, and therefore not like them’. Secondly, there is direct use of terms which relate to the experience of being ‘inside’ or ‘outside’, or even both at the same time.
Being an insider enables identification with the positive values associated with a local authority and its provision – for example, Michael says he goes to one forum because the area is known for being ‘pioneering’, suggesting that he takes on the pioneer identification by association with this partnership. When public agencies are associated with less positive images, suggestive of bureaucracy and oppressive systems, participants reinforce the outsider status of the voluntary sector. In the example below, Ellie resists identification with the public perceptions of public sector agencies as ‘Big Brother’:

‘we’re different, and I think it’s necessary that we’re different because we’re perceived, we’re not perceived by some families as Big Brother, which, you know, some statutory organisations will be.’ (Ellie)

Similarly, Ian refuses to identify himself as inside the public sector machine:

‘I’m not a cog, a small cog in a big machine, I’m actually making things happen.’ (Ian)

Other participants use metaphor which suggests that, rather than choosing between insider status, which identifies them with the public sector, or outsider status, which emphasises distinctiveness, they identify themselves as retaining insider and outsider status simultaneously. This dual insider/outsider status is reinforced by Charlotte’s multiple metaphors used to describe her work as a voluntary sector employee within a school:
'I’m here physically every day, these are the people that I see, and I’m now being aware I suppose just that it’s a kind of undercover cop, you get the gang. At the same time, I never wanted to be the outsider, because I wanted – so anything else you have to try the shoes on, you have to sit in the skin.’ (Charlotte)

Charlotte suggests that she retains her own identity as an outsider, but puts on the outward appearance of belonging. She steps into the shoes and even the skin of her partner colleagues, as she attempts to take on their perspective, but is at the same time ‘undercover’, moving within a world to which she does not belong, gathering information, which she elsewhere refers to as ‘research’:

‘you’re outside inside something – it’s a weird place to be straddling. But you do hear and absorb a lot...’ (Charlotte)

To look like everyone else sufficiently to belong to their world, and yet at the same time retain distinctive identity, is clearly important to Charlotte as she inhabits the alien world of the school system. Charlotte’s metaphors suggest it is not necessary to choose between identification as insider or outsider – she can identify herself in both ways simultaneously, and straddles between the two. In this ‘weird place’, she identifies herself not so much as an actor, but as listener and observer.

The metaphors discussed in this section suggest how participants’ begin to identify themselves in the partnership experience. We see them choosing to adopt and reject identities they associate with public agencies, when those identities confirm or threaten their own sense of
their role in partnership work, but also creating alternative identities for themselves, which suggest their unique role as those who are both insiders and outsiders. By implication, this metaphor also suggests that the public and voluntary sector worlds are quite different places. This implication is explored further below.

**Metaphor 3: Multiple Worlds**

The metaphor of insider and outsider suggests a duality of worlds – one is the public sector led partnership world which is at least initially alien to the voluntary sector partner, and the second the world in which the voluntary sector leader generally operates. In this section, I will focus on related metaphor which develops further this suggestion of multiple worlds, and the relationship of the voluntary sector leader to those worlds.

While Charlotte suggests that she operates in the public sector world, whilst maintaining an identity in the voluntary sector world, other participants suggest that in the context of cross-sector collaboration they stand apart from, whilst relating to, both of these, as illustrated in the two examples below:

‘...partnership work means me straddling different realities I suppose.’ (Eric)

‘I very often describe myself as being Janus-like, looking two ways, once towards my member [voluntary] organizations... So, we have to look to them, but also look to our principal funder which is the council, so there is a tension there undoubtedly. And it plays out every week, if not every day.’ (Ian)
These participants present themselves as positioned outside of both public sector and the voluntary sector worlds, but engaging with and responding to both. In the terms of the discussion above, they are insiders in neither world. While Eric suggests that he is stretched across these two worlds, Ian’s language suggests must look simultaneously, and is consequently pulled towards, two different directions.

Interestingly, each of these participants returns to this sense of two competing worlds later in the interview texts. Responding to a later question about the demands placed upon him in his role as voluntary sector leader and sector representative, Ian suggests that he is a Janus who at times has to look not only in two, but in three or even more directions. At a later stage in Eric’s interview, he specifically refutes the idea of separate public sector and voluntary sector worlds, acknowledging that he finds that there are colleagues within the public sector with whom he can identify and with whom he shares values – they too are straddlers of worlds; at the same time there are voluntary sector colleagues who remain firmly in a separate world which he suggests belongs to the past.

These participants present their experience of collaboration as one of multiple worlds, which at times appear as distinctive realities, but at other times appear to overlap. As collaborative partners, they stretch across these worlds, with eyes in the back of their heads, allowing them to focus simultaneously on multiple demands. Facing in two, three or four directions at once, stretching to reach across into different worlds - these images are suggestive of effort and discomfort, and indicate that the individual who collaborates across sectors lives with complexity, rather than choosing between dualities.
Metaphor 4: Space and Containment

In this section, I will discuss metaphors through which participants describe their experiences of collaboration in terms of space, physical containment, and shape. Again, this relates closely to the discussion above. As interviewees present themselves as standing apart from, whilst engaging with, the demands of the multiple worlds of collaboration, they draw attention to the space in which they operate, space which is variously described by participants as ‘tight’ or ‘loose’, suggesting respectively a sense of containment or freedom. Participants suggest that for those operating within the voluntary sector, ‘space’ is greater than that available in the public sector, providing ‘freedom to run’ (Donna) with new ideas. However, in cross-sector collaboration this space is constrained by the dominant public sector.

One participant suggests that the voluntary sector attracts people who like ‘space’, linking this to creativity and innovation. He suggests this is possible due to the fact that the sector has no statutory requirements to meet. However, he emphasises that this is about potential and possibility, and is not a perspective shared by all in the sector:

‘There is more possibility of inventing, being creative in the third sector, space....some people in the third sector have a narrow controlling view. But there is potentially more space...’ (Eric)
In the context of cross-sector collaboration, this space is impacted by the dominant public sector, its structures, processes, and priorities, so that it becomes necessary to actively seek space for development and growth, as illustrated by Charlotte’s comment that,

‘I’m looking for those spaces where that something can grow.’ (Charlotte)

Public sector dominance also means that the economic climate, and public sector cuts impact on the partnership space, as commissioning is described as held increasingly tightly by public sector commissioners. This is consequently experienced as space which has been re-shaped:

‘...thinner and more stretched out...’ (Sonia).

In summary, participants use of spatial metaphors suggests that they associate the voluntary sector with space for individuals to be creative and innovative if they so choose. In contrast, the constraints of the public sector may not allow for this freedom. In the context of cross-sector collaboration, these constraints have the effect of narrowing the space for creativity, but also for input from the community grass roots level. This is particularly evident at times of economic difficulty. Interestingly, these metaphors challenge the concept of cross-sector collaboration as an enabler of creativity and idea generation, which is frequently presented in policy.
6.3.2 Interim conclusions - metaphor

Exploration of interview texts through metaphors used by interviewees contributes to the aim of this research to understand how voluntary sector participants make sense of their leadership role in the collaborative context. Specifically, this discussion draws attention towards two key elements of the work of collaboration which are also evident in the thematic analysis. Firstly, there are metaphors which suggest a sense of powerlessness - the voluntary sector leader is an outsider; aboard a relentless roller coaster; stepping continually onto a tight-rope; in a space where potential for creativity is narrowed by the experience of working with the public sector. These images affirm the sense that voluntary sector participants in cross-sector partnership encounter embedded power relations between sectors.

In contrast, participants also use metaphors which suggest they can make a difference, and which highlight two ways in which they conceptualise this. Firstly, metaphors of game playing, tightrope walking, and working undercover suggest there is a performative and skilful element to the work of collaboration. Secondly, the images of undercover cop, ‘straddling’ and Janus suggest a need to continue to position oneself within and across different worlds, relating to multiple demands. The individual stands apart from seemingly separate worlds, but must look in the direction of each simultaneously, stretching to reach into each world, but absorbed by none of them. Rather than being absorbed into the public sector dominated collaborative space, like a cog in a machine, these participants endeavour to maintain their distinctive identity.
Approaching the data through metaphor highlights the experiential highs and lows of engaging in cross-sector collaboration. It draws attention to ways in which participants position themselves in relation to the two sectors. While these ideas are not revealed for the first time through the analysis of metaphor, they are reinforced through this approach. However, it is important not to over-emphasise the significance of this approach to the data. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the experience of collaboration as explored through thematic analysis, but does not stand alone: it adds richness to the thick description which was begun through thematic analysis, and insight into the sense-making of individuals. Although I have highlighted here some apparent similarities across individuals’ use of metaphors, this must be handled with care alongside findings from other elements of analysis.

6.4 Conclusion – returning to the research question

The findings from analysis of interview and observation data explored in this chapter provide insight into how participants enact leadership in the context of cross-sector collaboration, the significance they attach to their own actions, knowledge, experience, and to relationships with key individuals from across the sector boundary, and to networking with colleagues from within the voluntary sector. These findings also point to participants’ perceptions of apparently co-existing realities of their organisations’ independence and dependence on the public sector, which in turn impact on their understanding of how they can make a difference and influence public sector strategy and practice. The demands upon these individuals appear competing and at times contradictory, yet they continue to assert their ability to make things happen.
In the discussion chapter which follows, I will explore how the findings presented in this chapter, together with those presented in Chapter 5 above, begin to address the research questions.
Chapter 7

Discussion

7.1 Introduction

In this discussion chapter, I draw together the different elements of the thesis, in order to refocus on the research questions. The discussion which follows begins to link together the different pieces of the research, exploring the relationship between the findings discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 and issues raised by the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, in the context of the complex political and organisational environment described in Chapter 3. The aim is to draw on findings, literature and context, in order to address the research questions:

How do voluntary sector leaders practice (enact and make sense of) their leadership role in the context of cross-sector children’s services collaborative partnerships?

and...

What is the impact of context on their practice of leadership?

The account which follows contributes to the two purposes of the research outlined in Chapter 5. Firstly, it continues to develop the ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of cross-sector collaboration, which began in earlier chapters. Secondly, the chapter moves from description
to concepts which emerge out of that specific account, which contribute to collaboration theory, and which are offered as ‘handles’ for reflective practice (Huxham and Vangen, 2005).

Here I introduce some of the key concepts and terms explored in this discussion. These include ‘collaborative space’, ‘collaborative fabric’, and ‘collaborative conversation’, and ‘tensions’ and ‘dilemmas’. The first three of these terms are used to explore respectively, specific formal and informal examples (entities and relationships) of collaboration; the wider collaborative environment; and the discursive strategies and practices which facilitate collaboration.

In section 7.8 below, I return to the discussion of ‘tensions’ in collaborative contexts. In Chapter 2 I argued that IOR researchers use this term in a number of inter-related but distinct ways. In the discussion which follows, I use the term ‘tensions’ firstly as a descriptor of the experience of participants in cross-sector collaboration of being pulled in opposing directions, each of which appears at times demanding and attractive, but each of which is associated with risk. An example from every day practice might be the experience of a sector representative of being pulled in one direction by accountability to voluntary sector colleagues, and in an opposing direction by accountability to the public agency which provides her organisation’s funding. Each is a valid demand upon the individual.

Determining how to respond to the competing demands of these experiences of tension presents leaders with ‘dilemmas’, in which the potential responses may each appear reasonable (Hampden-Turner 1990), but carries risks. Initially, these may present as a binary ‘either/or’ choice between opposing actions, but deconstructing tensions through reflective practice enables more complex potential responses to emerge (Huxham and Vangen, 2005).
The IOR literature suggests that such ‘experienced tensions’ are endemic in collaborative practice, indicating that they are related to underlying tensions, which are inherent in inter-organisational collaboration (Huxham and Vangen 2005, Ospina and Saz Carranza 2010, Provan and Kenis 2008). Underlying or inherent tensions are unavoidable due to the paradoxical nature of inter-organisational collaboration, which inevitably makes paradoxical demands on participants (see Chapter 2 above for a review of the use of the term ‘tensions’ in the IOR literature). However, here I argue that the experience of tensions also relates to the individual’s position in the collaboration, her role (partnership manager, or participant), and to the power relationship between the collaborating organisations. In other words, I suggest that the experience of tensions is inevitable, but contextualised.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Building on the findings reported in chapters 5 and 6, I develop an account of voluntary sector engagement in cross-sector collaboration. This focuses on three elements of this engagement and proposes three conceptualisations which begin to capture this engagement as emergent theory:

- firstly, identifying key factors – policy, processes, relationships, and participant identity, which impact on the spaces of cross-sector collaboration;
- secondly, focusing on the activities of the voluntary sector leader, conceptualised as the weaving together of multiple ties across the sector boundary to develop a fabric of collaboration;
- and thirdly introducing a concept of ‘collaborative disruption’, which mirrors ‘collaborative thuggery’ (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a). While the latter is associated with the partnership manager and her focus on the whole collaboration, ‘collaborative
disruption’ relates to a participant perspective, and her focus on achieving support for her organisation and its purposes, and for the wider sector.

These emergent conceptualisations relate to existing theory of inter-organisational relations, but the activities of participants are also recognisable in terms of the wider leadership literature. Section 7.7 focuses specifically on the conceptualisations of ‘interweaving into the collaborative fabric’ and ‘collaborative disruption’ in the context of key issues raised by the review of the leadership literature in Chapter 2.

This discussion is followed by a focus on the experiences of tensions which emerge from analysis of voluntary sector practice, and explores how these relate to tensions which are described as inherent in the inter-organisational collaboration literature, specifically drawing attention to the need for both unity and diversity (Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010). In addition, I suggest that the voluntary sector perspective surfaced in this study suggests that experienced tensions and consequent dilemmas are related to an inherent power tension.

The chapter then moves on to explore the potential implications of this research for practice, suggesting how the conclusions of the research and emergent conceptualisations might be explored and refined in collaboration with practitioners to provide diagnostic tools, and intervention strategies to support voluntary sector practitioners in reflective practice.

In the conclusion, I return to the research questions, summarising and reflecting on the insights gained into the practice and sensemaking of voluntary sector leaders, and the significance of the cross-sector context on that practice.
7.2 Collaborative spaces

The thesis has explored the experiences of voluntary sector participants in cross-sector collaboration, and key aspects of the environment in which collaboration is enacted. In Chapter 6, I presented themes which convey the voluntary sector experience of collaboration, drawing on analysis of observation and interview texts. In Chapter 3, I wrote about the context of cross-sector collaboration, focusing on the policy environment, and in Chapter 5 analysed key policy documents. Four key factors emerge from this exploration of context and practice, which contribute to the continual shaping of collaborative spaces – policy, processes, interpersonal relationships, and participant identity (defined in Table 11 below). Here, I use the term ‘collaborative spaces’ to include formal collaborative entities (such as partnership boards, and agreements for joint working), and informal collaborative relationships and working groups – indeed any example of collaborative working, in which and from which further collaboration grows. These spaces form, re-shape, disperse, and give way to new collaborative spaces, as relationships, boards, working groups and agreements for joint working are devised, re-configured, dismantled, and replaced. This process of continual change takes place within, and contributes to, a wider collaborative environment, which I will explore later in this chapter.
Policy
Key drivers from national government which assert the direction of travel for service development and implementation at the local level. Policy will usually be encapsulated in documents – white and green papers, statutory guidance, letters to local authorities, but is also often conveyed through national teams tasked with dissemination. While some (limited) policy documents refer directly to cross-sector collaboration, others have a more indirect impact. Policy is a key element of the structural context of cross-sector collaboration.

Processes
Mechanisms for cross-sector collaboration, including joint commissioning arrangements, partnership boards, working groups, joint projects, and shared service delivery.

Relationships
Inter-personal relationships established by key individuals with their counterparts from across the sector boundary.

Participant Identity
This term refers to the individual participant’s identification with the organisation or group of organisations on whose behalf she is participating in the collaboration. For voluntary sector participants, the more specific ‘voluntary sector identity’ is linked to a narrative of a distinctive sector with a distinct contribution to make to cross-sector collaboration.

Box 12: Key factors impacting collaborative spaces
The significance of these four factors emerges from the research findings and account of context presented earlier in the thesis. In chapters 3 and 5, I explored the content and significance of policy for the shaping of cross-sector collaboration. Policy documents introduce and define formal collaborative entities. Policy is also a key driver for both formal and informal collaborative spaces; it impacts on the content of informal conversations between individuals, as well as providing the focus for working groups, boards and shared working agreements. Findings presented in chapter 6 show voluntary sector participants responding to different policy driven models of collaboration, and to changing policy priorities, as a consequence of continual policy change.

However, the account of the wider context in Chapter 3, and the analysis in Chapter 6, also indicate that the voluntary sector participant brings a sense of sector identity to cross-sector collaboration. Voluntary sector participants in collaboration draw on this identity (referred to hereafter in general terms as ‘participant identity’, or more specifically ‘voluntary sector identity’) to contribute to the shaping of collaborative spaces, as they respond to, but also seek to shape the local implementation of policy.

Data presented in chapter 6 also highlight the significance of the formal processes of collaboration, and present a view of these processes as dominated by the public sector. As a consequence of the difficulties they encounter in engaging with these processes, voluntary sector participants frequently seek out and engage in ongoing informal interpersonal relationships with key counterparts from across the sector boundary. Interviewees present these relationships as key to their enactment of leadership, enabling them to ‘make things
happen’ (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b), and to impact on the collaborative agenda, and thereby make a difference.

This exploration of the voluntary sector experience of cross-sector collaboration suggests then that these four key factors – policy, participant identity, processes and relationships, are continually shaping the spaces of collaboration. This is not to suggest that these four factors are equal in their impact, or to ignore the sectoral and inter-organisational power dynamics (which I will return to later) which impact on them, but focuses attention on the significance of each of these factors and the interaction between them in any specific example of collaboration. Approaching collaborative spaces through an understanding of these four factors and their interaction provides a useful framework for analysis, and reflection on practice.

From the voluntary sector perspective, an ideal experience of collaboration draws on all four of these factors, interacting in a balanced relationship with each other. In the figure below, the overlap area between these four factors represents this ideal:
In this model there is sufficient interaction between the priorities of policy and voluntary sector identity for collaboration to develop which moves the former forward, whilst enabling voluntary sector leaders to remain faithful to the latter. Relationships across the sector boundary are not completely dominated by either the public sector led processes of collaboration, or policy. Individuals are able to move between interpersonal relationships and more formal processes, developing further interaction between the different factors. In this ideal ‘collaborative space’, participants draw on all four factors, in order to influence the collaborative agenda and ‘make things happen’ (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b). However, even in this ideal context, participants will encounter tensions. These will be explored further in the discussion of tensions in section 7.7 below, but here I note that the experience of tensions is inevitable in the light of the underlying need for both unity and diversity in inter-organisational

In practice, voluntary sector participants' experience of formal cross-sector collaboration as described in this research more frequently takes place in spaces shaped by the public sector dominated factors of policy and processes, as indicated below:

**Figure 5: The policy/process dominated collaborative space**

In this space, there is minimal interaction between public sector dominated processes and policy and the other factors of relationships and participant identity. This represents collaborative space which participants find difficult to influence. There is little interest in the
collaboration in the voluntary sector purposes, mission and values with which the voluntary sector participant identifies herself, and working through relationships provides only limited opportunities to impact on this space.

In contrast, collaborative spaces which develop in the overlapping space between relationships and participant identity (Figure 6 below) may appear much more productive. In these spaces, voluntary sector participants find sufficient common interest with their public sector counterparts to build relationships which focus on the purposes, mission and values associated with their sector identity. However, if these collaborative spaces do not also relate (at least over time) to policy, and enable engagement with processes, they remain at the backstage, informal level, and engagement here is unlikely to have an impact on the collaborative agenda and ‘make things happen’. In this context, voluntary sector leaders might be advised to highlight even minor areas of potential interaction between the shared interests of the individuals and areas of national policy. Alternatively, voluntary and public sector leaders in such informal and potentially sidelined relationships might support each other to promote their shared interests within public sector dominated processes, even though initial analysis suggests this will be an uphill task.
These examples begin to suggest how exploring the four factors and the relationship between them in any specific collaborative space might help practitioners understand why and how they are likely to be able to impact the collaborative agenda and make things happen in collaborative contexts - or not. They raise questions as to how interaction between the four factors can be increased, and draw attention to the fact that these factors, and consequently the relationship between them are by no means static. An example, here, would be a collaborative space (formal or informal), which arises when government policy shifts and is perceived by parties from different sectors as closely identified with the mission and priorities which are currently being prioritised from within the voluntary sector. The potential for further collaboration is increased, and voluntary sector participants perceive an opportunity to
make things happen in line with their sector identity and current priorities. They establish a process, perhaps a working group, to enable them to develop their collaboration further. As the working group meets regularly, interpersonal relationships form, and individuals continue to pursue their shared agenda through informal meetings. The working group briefly begins to resemble the ‘ideal’ collaborative space, until government policy moves in a different direction, and no longer relates to the interests and focus of the working group.

This account provides a model, then, for understanding key contextual factors which impact on the spaces of collaboration, but also for reflecting on the experience of continual change and consequent frustration, reported by participants, as those spaces are continually re-shaped by those factors. It affirms the significance of context for understanding how cross-sector relationships develop. This in turn raises key questions as to how voluntary sector participants enact leadership and make things happen in these spaces, which are so often experienced as fluid, short-lived, and in the control of public sector agencies. In the section which follows, I will suggest that even though specific collaborative spaces form, re-form, and disappear, a focus on the wider collaborative environment, and consequently on the longer term, provides a more positive perspective.

7.3 Weaving the ‘collaborative fabric’

In the section below, I turn from a focus on specific collaborative spaces to the wider cross-sector collaborative environment. I will compare this environment to a fabric in which multiple
layers of different origin are woven together\textsuperscript{17}. The result is highly textured and frequently uneven, but can be resilient when the layers are tightly interwoven. These layers include the four key factors identified above – public policy, the processes of collaboration, interpersonal relationships, and participant identity. This is not to say that these are the only layers, but rather to emphasise their significance for voluntary sector participants. The layers of collaboration are woven together through the day to day practice of participants from different collaborating organisations, highlighting the significance of individual agency in this public sector dominated context. The phrase ‘collaborative fabric’ is therefore used to refer to the wider collaborative environment, in which specific examples of collaboration (collaborative spaces) are enacted. This thesis argues that an environment with multiple links across policy, processes, relationship, and participant identity enables such examples to flourish, and that voluntary sector participants can contribute to these multiple links primarily through discursive strategies. These interwoven links frequently begin from the layer of interpersonal relationships (Ospina and Foldy, 2010).

The ‘collaborative fabric’ provides then the wider environment in which collaborative spaces are enacted, contributing to the development of ‘inter-organizational capability’ within the ‘inter-organizational domain’ (Trist, 1983). Inter-organisational capability relates to the increasing ability of organisations to engage with other organisations, but also to the growth in practices, language, expectations and confidence in collaboration at individual, organisational, and inter-organisational levels. As a consequence of this growth in capability, capacity for

\textsuperscript{17} In weaving, a multi-layered fabric is constructed by joining together the layers at multiple points to construct a double, triple, or even quadruple weave. The weaver harnesses the layers together with (many or few) threads, and a design emerges as threads interchange from one layer to another. See ‘On weaving’ by Anni Albers (1965) Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT, 1965.
future collaboration increases, leading to further growth in collaborative activity and relationships (Cropper, 1996).

Collaborative spaces – including working groups, informal backstage meetings, formal boards, voluntary sector initiated meetings, joint position papers, shared service delivery, and a joint approach to commissioning - can emerge from any one of the strands of the ‘collaborative fabric’. They are initiated through interpersonal relationships, policy, processes, and participants’ identification with their organisation, its purpose, and the wider sector, but collaborative spaces ‘work’ when they draw on all four layers of the ‘collaborative fabric’, as indicated by the central overlap area in Figure 4. Here, collaborative spaces, which are not only driven by interpersonal relationships, but also relate to current policy priorities, can be played out within the constraints of public sector processes, and resonate with participant identity. This in turn tends to build inter-organisational capability, leading to further collaboration, and consequently increasing capacity for future collaboration. For example, processes for shared service delivery, underpinned by a contractual agreement, can be the source of an interpersonal connection, which becomes a new space for collaboration. In this space, ideas, differences, and alternative interpretations are surfaced, which may then be taken forward for consideration in formal partnership discussions, potentially challenging current priorities. Ultimately, these discussions may impact on commissioning agreements, and consequently on the voluntary organisation’s capacity for future collaboration. Over time, the different layers of collaboration become increasingly interconnected and woven together, creating an environment which facilitates future collaboration.
This discussion provides an account of key factors in the context of collaboration – policy, processes, relationships, and participant identity, but also begins to indicate how individual actors are able to interact with and impact on their environment through practice which engages with these factors. The actions of weaving together these different layers contribute to the construction of ‘collaborative fabric’ which is robust and resilient. At the level of each separate layer, the cross-sector relationship appears vulnerable – policy changes; processes change to reflect changing policy and priorities; and relationships at the interpersonal level end when individuals move on. I have shown (see Chapter 3) that even sector distinctiveness, in which voluntary sector participant identity is rooted, is a fluid and ambiguous concept, which moves in response to the socio-political environment. However, when interwoven, the multi-layered ‘collaborative fabric’ is resilient, and one thread may break without irreparably damaging the whole. This suggests that individuals can do more than simply wait for the beneficial alignment of the four key factors to create collaborative space. Individuals from all sectors can draw on the tactics and tools at their disposal to weave the layers together to create a resilient and robust ‘collaborative fabric’ – an environment which facilitates further collaboration across the sector divide. In the discussion which follows, I focus on the role of voluntary sector participants in this interweaving.

7.3.1 Interweaving from the interpersonal layer

The picture which emerges from the empirical research is one in which voluntary sector participants actively contribute to the interweaving of the different layers of the ‘collaborative fabric’, as they continually build and maintain cross-sector connections at different inter-layered levels of the collaborative relationship – developing an interpersonal relationship
through engagement in the processes of a partnership board; presenting ideas and interpretations rooted in voluntary sector identity and distinctiveness through both formal boards and informal relationships. Over time, they gradually weave these layers together into the ‘collaborative fabric’, until they become inextricably linked, building inter-organisational capability. However, some layers of the fabric are more accessible than others. Some are tightly woven, hard to penetrate – these are the layers held tightly by public sector structures and authority, the layers of policy and processes. At the layer of interpersonal relationships, the weave is looser and the pattern emergent; the fabric at this layer is malleable, and easily linked to other layers. Thus, collaboration developed through relationships can frequently be linked back into formal processes and policy debates.

This assertion of the significance of the layer of interpersonal relationships for voluntary sector weavers builds on Ospina and Foldy’s account of leaders of community organisations, ‘weaving multiple worlds together through interpersonal relationships’ (Ospina and Foldy, 2010). Their research highlights the significance of the cultivation of interpersonal relationships as a leadership practice which ‘weave[s] together the diverse, often fragmented and complex set of expectations, needs and goals of individuals and organizations, enabling them to engage in collective action’ (ibid p.300). Here the unit of analysis is a collaborative network between community organizations, in which interpersonal ties are seen to build the network’s capacity.

In contrast, in the current research the focus is on asymmetric (ie. public sector dominated) cross-sector collaboration, in which interpersonal relationships reach across the sector divide, by-passing the constraints of formal public sector dominated collaborative processes, and establishing space for further collaboration to develop. Individual leaders build multiple ties as
they span the sector boundary (Williams, 2013), moving back and forth through the interpersonal relational layer of collaboration. This is not to suggest a simple dichotomy in which the voluntary sector represents one ‘world’, and the public sector another, with interpersonal relationships connecting the two, but rather to suggest that weaving which begins at this level reach into the layers of processes and policy, but also into key areas related to participant identity – professional background, concerns regarding social issues, interpretations of community need, organisational priorities, and identification with the wider sector. Thus, multiple ties of interconnectedness build up over time.

This emphasis on time suggests that longevity is a significant factor in the development of the collaborative relationship. As highlighted in Chapter 6, many of the inter-organisational cross-sector relationships explored in the data were enacted at multiple levels over a number of years. Over this period, individuals and organisations, and the relationships between them, become enmeshed in the fabric of collaboration across a locality, becoming a part of the ‘local leadership coalition’ (Purdue, 2005, p.257). Ultimately, the significance of any particular individual - their actions, behaviours and perceived expertise, may recede in importance within the tightly interwoven multiplicity of relationships. For example, Rachel, now a public sector manager, draws attention to one VCO which has impacted on local authority policy and practice. She links this with key individuals within the organisation but asserts that over time (years), respect for this organisation has moved beyond the individuals to the organisation as a whole, which has become accepted by the local authority as a model of good practice, even as individuals have moved on. The organisation is linked by multiple threads into the ‘collaborative fabric’, and consequently remains linked, even when the thread interwoven by an individual breaks off.
In the shorter term, though, the ability to build relationships at the one to one level, drawing on interpersonal skills, and on individual experience, which provides key points of connectivity, appears to be crucial for VCO leaders in this study. Using herself as a key resource for collaborating through relationship building, the VCO leader draws on her knowledge and expertise, built up through previous experience, and association with a distinctive voluntary sector perspective. Participants in this research repeatedly asserted the significance of this ‘personal leadership’ approach (Crosby and Bryson, 2005), which is dependent on their own experience, personal commitment, and location within the wider sector.

If the individual participant is herself the primary resource for the task of interweaving, her primary tool for the task is discourse. Here the term ‘discourse’ is used in a generalist sense to include an exchange of ideas, words (written and spoken), and interpretations (see section 7.5 below for further discussion of the significance of discourse). This resonates with the image of collaboration as a ‘conversation’ explored in the findings chapter.

‘Ellie’s story’, told in chapter 6, provides an example of how the layers of connectedness are woven together to create ‘collaborative fabric’, through an ongoing ‘collaborative conversation’ which begins at the interpersonal level. Ellie’s organisation is linked to the public sector through its dependence on public sector funding, and through a shared focus on families in need. She is aware that this funding is under threat, due to the changing focus of government policy, as well as public sector cuts. Her local organisation is federated with others nationally, and she explains how many are adapting their service model in response to this changing policy focus. Rather than tackling this threat head on through the commissioning
processes, Ellie establishes a link between herself and her public sector counterpart, Jean. As a result of their backstage informal meeting, new threads are interwoven across the sector divide:

- Jean expresses a concern which had previously been unspoken across the organisational divide: Ellie takes this back to address with her team. As a result changes are made to practice which encourage the social work team to collaborate further with Ellie’s team.

- Jean offers to allocate time from her team to train Ellie’s team: Ellie accepts, and the team receives training. As a result new connections are made across the sector boundary between trainer and trained, and the potential for coherence and commonality increases at the level of shared service delivery.

- Ellie offers to pilot a new approach to service delivery, without an offer of additional funding from Jean, in order to evidence the impact of an alternative model. Jean will engage in monitoring this impact with Ellie. They will meet regularly, and develop a shared monitoring process.

- On both sides, there is new learning, a greater appreciation of the other at the individual and the organisational level, as well as a continuing relationship and ongoing collaborative conversation between Ellie and Jean, but also increasingly between their colleagues.

At this stage, there is no new financial relationship, nor any change to written agreements, but new collaborative spaces develop out of this informal meeting between colleagues across the sector boundary. Ellie and Jean’s conversation weaves threads of connectivity beyond their
inter-personal relationship into shared processes, exploration of policy, and policy implementation in their organisations, and enables Ellie to present an alternative voluntary sector service model. New collaborative spaces emerge, including areas of joint practice, training and shared learning, and a shared focus on and understanding of the families for whom they both provide services, in addition to the ongoing interpersonal relationship, which in turn prepares for further inter-connectedness. Multiple threads of connectivity are developed, initially through discursive strategies - a request for help, an expression of concern, an offer made, together provide a platform for further collaboration. Gradually an interwoven ‘collaborative fabric’ emerges from this multiplicity of connections.

This account of cross-sector collaboration draws attention away from formal collaborative entities, and instead reinforces the messiness, fluidity, and dynamic nature of ongoing collaboration (Huxham and Vangen, 2000a, Huxham and Vangen, 2005), which in turn reflects the complexity of the social ‘messes’ (Ackoff, 1974) which it seeks to addresses. It also provides a more positive and hopeful account of collaboration for individual participants and their organisations, as it suggests that individuals can make a difference to the collaborative environment, and that organisations can potentially remain embedded in the collaborative environment, even when key individuals move on.

The role of the voluntary sector leader in constructing and maintaining links between these multiple layers of connectivity reflects Williams’ description of the boundary spanner as a ‘reticulist’, who manages the multiple interdependencies of cross-sector collaboration (Williams, 2013). This draws attention away from an understanding of the cross-sector relationship in terms of a dependence/independence dichotomy, which has been at the heart
of much debate about the nature and future of the voluntary sector (see for example Clifford et al., 2010). Instead, the reticulist role is built on a presumption of a relationship which is a web of multiple, inter-related, and dynamic interdependencies, which reflects recent interpretations of the relationship between the voluntary sector and the state (Alcock, 2013, Crouch, 2011). Williams’ (2013) description of the reticulist draws out the significance of developing and maintaining relationships at the interpersonal level, building threads of understanding and support through outward appearances of domination and control:

‘The ability to forge effective and trusting inter-personal relationships with a diverse range of stakeholders irrespective of the trappings of power is a critical ability...’
(Williams, 2013, p.25)

Voluntary sector leaders in this study find that paying attention to the interpersonal layer of the ‘collaborative fabric’ has the effect of increasing their access to collaborative processes, and consequently builds capacity (Ospina and Saz Carranza 2010) for future collaboration, in spite of the appearance of public sector dominance of the cross-sector relationship. This perspective draws on a view of leadership as enacted through relational social processes (Uhl-Bien, 2006), which operate in multiple directions (Pearce and Conger, 2003), influencing peers, but also those with a greater access to power in the form of public sector resources and authority. The image of collaborating as weaving together the threads of the ‘collaborative fabric’ suggests that voluntary sector leaders can make a difference, ‘leading’ in the collaborative context, and making things happen, by weaving a voluntary sector discursive thread through relationship building which opens up the seemingly impenetrable layers of public sector led collaborative processes.
In section 7.7, I explore further how this concept of ‘interweaving’ can be understood in terms of mainstream leadership theory.

### 7.4 Adapting to collaborate

The layer of interpersonal relationship is then significant in the weaving of the ‘collaborative fabric’, but this is not to suggest that voluntary sector leaders in collaborations focus all of their attention at the interpersonal level. While Ellie’s story exemplifies the reticulist role and the significance of interpersonal relationships, it also illustrates the emphasis made by Williams (2013) on the multiplicity of roles enacted by boundary spanners within a single context. Indeed, Ellie evidences each of Williams’ boundary spanning roles in the scenario described above. As entrepreneur, Ellie presents an alternative service model; in the absence of funding she commits her organisation to modelling this innovative approach, believing that its success will ultimately result in further business for the organisation. As interpreter, she seeks to convey her organisation’s understanding of the needs of families in the community which this model seeks to address; she also listens and adjusts her message accordingly. As coordinator, she goes back to her organisation to put in place the planning for the agreed pilot project, but also for the continued areas of liaison and connectivity agreed with Jean.

Like partnership managers, then, voluntary sector leaders in this study exhibit aspects of each of Williams’ boundary spanning roles of reticulist, entrepreneur, interpreter, and coordinator, frequently enacting different roles within a short space of time, or seemingly simultaneously,
in a single setting. However, they also move beyond these roles. Specifically, they move beyond the interpreter role to persuasion and advocacy\(^{18}\) on behalf of communities, interest groups, and the wider sector, as they try to exert influence, in order to achieve a ‘cognitive shift’ (Ospina and Foldy, 2010, p.297) in the minds of individuals, and a change in the policies, priorities and practices of organisations. This aspect of voluntary sector activity is not recognised by Williams’ boundary spanning concept, but does appear in the voluntary sector literature (see for example Cairns et al., 2010).

This research suggests then that the role of advocate should be added to the list of the roles of voluntary sector boundary spanners. However, rather than highlighting a definitive list of voluntary sector boundary spanning roles, there is a sense in this study of individuals being prepared to develop a role which meets current needs, even when those needs are apparently competing or even incompatible, as demonstrated in a participant’s image of himself as a Janus who faces not only two, but rather many directions (see Chapter 6). They adapt to public sector determined changes in policy and processes, adapting their roles to work pragmatically with the material for collaboration which these changes offer. Examples occurred during this research in relation to the Coalition’s removal of guidance for Children’s Trust Boards, and the variety of local authority led collaborative arrangements which arose from this policy change. In the three localities in which these changes were observed very different arrangements were developed for the future leadership of children’s services. In each case, individual sector representatives and infrastructure organisations adapted their roles in order to respond to and continue to engage with these new arrangements. This suggests that the relationship between

\(^{18}\) I do not here using the term ‘advocate’ to describe the work of some VCOs to advocate on behalf of individuals, but rather to encapsulate the work of representing community interests.
voluntary sector enactment of leadership in collaboration and public policy, is at least partly one in which the former continually adapts to the latter.

This multiplicity of potential roles highlights the need for voluntary sector boundary spanners to draw on a wide range of skills, but perhaps more importantly to be able to deploy skills appropriately into the multiple and interwoven layers of the ‘collaborative fabric’, as they continually assess the environment of policy and public sector priorities. This reflects the concept of a ‘leadership portfolio’ (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a), an acceptance of divergent ways of doing leadership, which enables leadership practice which is contextual (Osborn et al., 2002, Osborn and Marion, 2009) and adaptive (Heifetz, 1994). In one set of circumstances this involves accepting and working within public policy, in another seeking to change public sector priorities; at one time taking a formal representational route into collaboration processes, and at another using an informal interpersonal route. Voluntary sector boundary spanners develop their role(s) as collaborative spaces open up, take shape, and re-configure, through changes in policy, public sector priorities and practices. Collaborative arrangements, partnership boards, meetings, commissioning processes, funding opportunities, and priorities for service delivery are continually reshaped and replaced by shifting policy, and voluntary sector leaders who want to exert influence on their public sector colleagues develop their roles accordingly.

This understanding suggests that lists of leadership activities, like those explored in the literature review (see Table 2), although helpful, are likely to be incomplete and contingent, as they will never capture all aspects of leadership in all contexts. It focuses attention instead on the relationship between the leader, the interwoven spaces of collaboration, and the factors which shape those spaces. As policies and priorities change, so does the shape of the
collaborative space – consequently the role(s) of the leader relating to that space will also need to change. For these reasons, leaders in (rather than of) collaboration will exhibit behaviours which appear opportunisti
c, and at times conflicting.

This proposition resembles conclusions about the activities of partnership managers who focus on the whole collaboration (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a), but highlights the different relationship between voluntary sector participants and the collaboration. From a voluntary sector perspective, the purpose of understanding the policy context is in order to identify the potential for influencing public sector led processes and priorities through collaborative practice, whilst remaining committed to making a distinctive voluntary sector contribution. Depending on the assessment of the policy context and the relationship with the individual’s understanding of what it means to maintain voluntary sector identity, this contribution may be expressed as support or challenge, as the presentation of possible alternatives or interpretations, or as outright opposition and protest.

7.5  Shaping the collaborative conversation

I have described above how voluntary sector participants contribute to the environment in which collaboration is enacted (the ‘collaborative fabric’), as they actively build connectivity between the interpersonal elements of collaboration and other more formal elements. In addition, I have suggested that voluntary sector participants adapt to the spaces of collaboration, as they are continually shaped by public policy and processes. They adopt and move between different roles in order to engage with new partnership structures,
commissioning arrangements, and other collaborative spaces which emerge from national policy or local public sector led implementation. This emphasis on the adaptive reflects the asymmetry of the cross-sector relationship, as surfaced throughout this research.

This is not to suggest though that voluntary sector participants do not make active interventions into both specific collaborative spaces and the wider collaborative environment. These interventions relate to the activities of ‘framing’ (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001), ‘interpreting’ (Williams, 2002, Williams, 2013), and ‘advocating’ (Cairns et al., 2010), and to participants’ sense of a distinct voluntary sector identity (Macmillan, 2013). Voluntary sector leadership in collaboration is not simply limited to a passive role, which adapts to meet the needs and priorities of policy; it is also driven by participants’ sense of voluntary sector distinctiveness, which frames their activities and their discourse. This suggests that the work of interpreting or framing, which is identified as a leadership activity in many of the studies of IOR leadership (Agranoff and McGuire, 2001, Crosby and Bryson, 2005, Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010, Williams, 2002), is crucial for voluntary sector participants. In formal partnership boards and informal one to one meetings, participants offer an alternative narrative which is based on an understanding of voluntary sector distinctiveness and identity, which they link closely with a distinct understanding of community needs.

As they express alternative interpretations of policy, of community needs, and of potential responses to those needs, they also impact in turn on the shaping of collaborative spaces, as they contribute to the framing of cross-sector conversations, both through informal interpersonal relationships, and formal collaborative processes. This work of interpreting,
advocating, and framing develops new connections across the sector boundary and potentially builds capacity for further collaboration:

- Interpreting public policy from a voluntary sector perspective to public sector counterparts increases the possibility of increased cross-sector understanding which can in turn be the impetus for further collaboration.
- Interpreting public policy to voluntary sector colleagues enables further engagement (whether support or challenge) with local policy implementation.
- Presenting an alternative interpretation of community needs challenges prevailing public sector priorities and plans, and may provide future opportunities for a shared approach to service delivery.
- Advocating on behalf of a community (of place or interest) may lead to a shift in public sector priorities.

At this discursive level of collaboration – the level of words and ideas, of story-telling and narrative, voluntary sector leaders are able to contribute to the shaping of shared understanding across the sector boundary, and consequently to changes in public sector processes and priorities as they implement national policy at the local level. One participant explains that it takes a long time for a local authority to reach a shared interpretation of new policy which extends throughout its bureaucratic processes. The voluntary sector can frequently reach a quicker interpretation and bring this interpretation into collaborative meetings. In this context, the first interpretation heard by many public sector colleagues is from the voluntary sector perspective. This is just one example of how ideas, interpretations, and discursive strategies can be a source of leverage for voluntary sector participants.
This finding affirms the emphasis in Hardy and Phillips work (1998) on the significance of discourse as a source of power. It also builds on concepts of leadership as a process of meaning making (Smircich and Morgan, 1982) or sensemaking (Pye, 2005). Here discourse is significant at the level of both ideas and words. It is not simply about presenting a different idea for public sector colleagues to accept or reject, it is also about naming an issue differently (Ospina and Foldy, 2010), describing it in different terms, and consequently re-framing social problems, and potential solutions. In Agranoff and McGuire’s (2001) terms, the work of framing not only introduces new ideas, but also subtly alters perceptions. However, this work is focused in a different direction here as a participant activity which challenges the dominant policy-driven public sector narratives, whereas in Agranoff and McGuire’s account the work of framing is an activity of the collaborative public manager who seeks to promote the public policy narrative.

Discourse is a potentially powerful tool for voluntary sector leaders for several reasons. Firstly, discourse, like interpersonal relationships, can potentially be the bedrock on which further collaborative capacity can be built, as key words, concepts and ideas become incorporated into the shared narratives of collaborative practice. Secondly, as Hardy and Phillips highlight (1998), discourse is a source of power. Of the three sources of power which they recognise in collaborative contexts – authority, resources and discourse, the latter is the most accessible to voluntary sector participants.

In the context described in this research, the state authorises public sector leadership of children’s services, and provides them with the resources to enact that leadership. The state
also dominates the discourse of children’s services through public policy. However, the ambiguity of this policy has been demonstrated in earlier chapters. Collaboration offers an opportunity to step into the policy cycle (Crosby and Bryson 2005). National policy must be interpreted, ‘translated’ (Freeman 2009), at the local level, before it is implemented, and it is into this process of translation that voluntary sector leaders can offer their alternative ideas. This presents a view of the practice of leadership which affirms the significance of discursive practices, and of processes of meaning making (Pye, 2005, Smircich and Morgan, 1982, Weick, 1995), through which social actors re-direct attention, and (at least potentially) engage others in a different direction (Drath et al., 2008).

Some of the examples in this study show that the outcome of such discursive interventions cannot be predicted in terms of the impact on local translation and implementation. However, perhaps more significant in terms of cross-sector collaboration is the move from the monologue of public policy to a dialogic conversation which draws on discourse from the perspective of the different collaboration participants. As has been illustrated, this ‘collaborative conversation’ can contribute to the shaping of current collaborative spaces, but also to the shaping of future collaboration.

7.6 Disrupting collaboration

The image of cross-sector collaboration as an ongoing conversation is not used here to suggest that continual processes of interpreting and re-framing will elide differences between collaboration participants. Nor, is this image used to suggest the harmonious conversation of
friendship. Instead, this is a conversation in which different ideas can be surfaced, and dominant ideas (such as policy and the interpretations of public agencies) can be challenged. Participants in the conversation may change their mind during the conversation; they may reach a consensus, but equally they may leave the collaboration table with a multiplicity of competing ideas and interpretations of policy and of needs, and with increased uncertainty as to the right actions to take. These effects are opposite to those sought by the partnership manager as ‘integrative leader’ who seeks to integrate different perspectives, align processes and systems, and reduce uncertainties (Bryson et al 2006), using facilitative tactics, but also ‘collaborative thuggery’ to make things happen (Vangen and Huxham 2003). The view of collaboration as a conversation which also challenges and disrupts reflects the need for diversity as well as unity, in order to avoid collaborative inertia, or the complete dominance of one (public sector) perspective. By practising ‘collaborative disruption’, challenging dominant narratives, and offering alternative perspectives, voluntary sector participants ensure the collaboration continues to reflect its diverse participants.

The concept of ‘collaborative disruption’, which is introduced here, mirrors the concept of ‘collaborative thuggery’ (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a). It acknowledges that while voluntary sector participants act ‘in the spirit of collaboration’ (participating, liaising, supporting, communicating, interpreting and managing multiple interdependencies), they also act in ways which disrupt the public policy dominated monologic narrative, ensuring that collaboration is a two-way conversation. This involves questioning data and interpretations, challenging priorities, and thus changing the pace, and sometimes even halting policy implementation. At the extreme, it might involve enacting ‘exit’ (Hirschman 1970), withdrawing from contracting arrangements or shared delivery. More often, collaborative disruption is expressed as
voluntary sector ‘voice’ (Hirschman, 1970) which challenges interpretations and ideas, either in formal partnership meetings or backstage, out of public view, thus maintaining the outward ‘spirit of collaboration’. The concept has some similarities to Heifetz’s account of leaders ‘without authority’ who compel those with authority to acknowledge hard facts and competing perspectives (Heifetz, 1994). Both ‘collaborative disruption’ and activities ‘in the spirit of collaboration’ are necessary to ‘nurture’ the collaborative relationship from the voluntary sector perspective. Without the ‘disruptive’ element of the relationship, the voluntary sector is positioned only as supporter of the public sector led collaboration, its policies and priorities, and frequently as deliverer of public policy. It may consequently be welcomed as a participant, but over time will appear to have nothing distinctive to offer.

As indicated above, collaborative disruption is closely related to but distinct from collaborative thuggery, as outlined by Vangen and Huxham (2003). The latter is associated with the partnership manager whose focus is on the whole collaboration. In methodological terms, the unit of analysis for studies which focus on the partnership manager is the individual within the collaboration. The activities of the partnership manager are those which build and maintain the collaboration, and which are focused on integrating competing perspectives. In contrast, the unit of analysis in this study is the participant positioned within a voluntary sector organisation, and on her activities to build and manage the relationship between that organisation and the collaboration. The term ‘collaborative disruption’ is therefore used to describe leadership practices in which a challenge is made to the dominant public sector agency, whilst simultaneously maintaining a more supportive collaborative approach ‘in the spirit of collaboration’. Examples in the data of this simultaneous challenge and support include:
- Making a complaint on behalf of voluntary sector agencies with the effect of halting a policy change, whilst continuing to engage in formal partnership boards and relationship building at the interpersonal level.
- Challenging a funding decision in a meeting in front of voluntary sector and public sector colleagues, whilst continuing to negotiate backstage.
- Welcoming reports presented to meetings by public sector colleagues, then immediately challenging the narrative of the report.
- Accepting an invitation to offer input into the partnership board’s debate on finance, and presenting a paper which presents an alternative narrative of service development.

The intent of these activities is to challenge, disrupt and potentially halt the narrative of public sector priorities and policies, as well as to offer an alternative narrative or interpretation. Rather than attempting to ‘integrate’ competing perspectives, the task is to multiply possible interpretations, and persuade significant participants (particularly representatives of public agencies) to adopt a different interpretation which supports the VCO’s mission.

Tactics of ‘collaborative disruption’ may open up collaboration participants to accusations of manipulation and duplicity (Page, 2010). Consequently, these tactics carry risks for voluntary sector leaders, including the risk of being perceived as difficult and oppositional, and of being positioned by those managing the collaboration as unhelpful participants who should be removed from the collaborative context as quickly as possible. From the perspective of partnership managers, such tactics may be a reason for activities which move towards
collaborative thuggery, as they cajole and persuade collaborating parties to come together, focusing on what is shared, rather than on differences. However, collaboration theory affirms the significance of differences between collaborating organisations, for the potential for collaborative advantage (Huxham and Vangen 2005). Thus, the tension between the partnership manager’s emphasis on integration, and the participant’s emphasis on distinctiveness and difference may be key to the achievement of collaborative advantage. Without integration, the collaboration is simply a group of organisations with different interests and competing perspectives; without expression of distinctiveness, collaboration participants become incorporated into the dominant perspective – here that provided by public agencies.

The tactics of ‘collaborative disruption’ are also closely related to Ospina and Saz Carranza’s (2010) account of the need for both dialogue and confrontation in inter-organisational collaboration, which they describe as an inherent tension. However, I suggest that the need to adopt both dialogue and confrontation is not in itself an inherent tension, but rather a response to the inherent unity/diversity tension. I return to this in the discussion of tensions below.

It is worth noting here that reviews of children’s services have repeatedly warned of the dangers of an approach which closes down the possibility of alternative interpretations of the needs of children in society. They reinforce the need for agencies working collaboratively to avoid the risk of collusion, interpreting everything in the light of the familiar, or of simply failing to question prevailing interpretations (Parton, 2004, Parton, 2012). At the level of individual children’s lives, this failure has sometimes had devastating results. Representatives of local
authority children’s services departments should then consider how to ensure that the
different perspectives of other non-statutory organisations are surfaced, offering alternative
interpretations, and when necessary halting practices which fail to draw on the diversity of
competing perspectives, while rushing to act collaboratively and deliver a ‘seamless’ service. I
return to the potential significance of this ‘mindful’ inter-organisational approach (Weick and
Sutcliffe, 2007) in section 7.9 below, when discussing the implications of this research for
practice.

7.7 Collaboration as leadership practice

The section below explores how the account of collaborative practice which has appeared in
the thesis thus far, and the concepts which emerge from that account, can be understood in
terms of mainstream leadership theory. Specifically, the theories discussed here are those
reviewed in Chapter 2 (section 2.4.2) which provide frameworks for thinking about leadership
practice beyond hierarchy. This discussion relates to the issues highlighted in that review,
directing the researcher’s attention as follows,

1. Towards leadership as processes through which influence is extended between
   individuals, with and without formal authority.
2. Towards leadership which interprets, makes sense, directs attention, and engages,
   rather than providing solutions.
3. Towards the practices through which individuals contribute to the framing of complex social problems, and responses to those problems, and mobilise others to tackle these problems.

4. Towards the relationship between context and agency as mutually interacting factors in the enactment of leadership, so that leaders respond to context, but contribute to the framing of that context.

5. Towards practice, process, and meaning-making at the micro level of day to day practice, and away from the concept of the unique individual.

The picture of collaborative practice presented in this study suggests that processes of influence extend in multiple directions (Pearce and Conger, 2003). Leadership, understood in these terms, can be seen to be enacted by participants who have apparently little access to the mechanisms of power. They have few tangible resources, and no formal authority to lead in the collaboration context, yet they undoubtedly exert influence. Leadership can here be understood to be ‘shared’, a process of influence which operates through peer and upward influence (Pearce and Conger, 2003), as well as downward through structures of hierarchy and power. These lateral and upward processes of influence achieve outcomes. In examples in the data of this study, public agencies review decisions, offer practical support, re-allocate funding, and reassess priorities. However, the focus here is not on the achievement of common goals as highlighted by some definitions of leadership (see for example Northouse, 2004), but instead on the re-framing of social issues, and the re-direction of the attention of agencies with formal authority and greater resources. This account has similarities to that described by Heifetz (1994) as ‘leadership without authority’.
While the practice of leadership in this account can be seen as ‘shared’, it does not imply that there is in any sense an active distribution or dispersal of leadership by dominant agencies, replacing traditional asymmetries, as suggested in theories of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2000, Gronn, 2002, Spillane, 2006). This reinforces Bolden’s (2011) point that distributed leadership theory tends to take insufficient account of power, even while it seeks to address practice in contexts beyond hierarchy. In the context explored in this study, the power asymmetry remains, despite the best intentions of individuals, and even when the leadership style is a collaborative one. In this sense, context constrains leadership practice – a context which includes power asymmetry, the dominance of public policy, and processes which are in the control of the more powerful collaborating partner.

One way of understanding this shared approach to leadership in the context of asymmetric inter-organisational collaboration is to suggest that this is a context in which many lead, but where the individuals who lead do so from different authority positions (Heifetz, 1994). While some are formally authorised through national policy and the processes of national and local government, others are authorised through a range of less formal mechanisms which operate at different levels. Initially, authorisation to collaborate in the inter-organisational domain (Trist, 1983) comes from the individual’s organisation, but this may carry little weight in the collaboration context. Heifetz (Heifetz, 1994) argues that the individual extends the basis of her authority through a wider community network. This has some similarity to the ways in which the individuals in this study engage in sector networks, in order to collaborate beyond the sector boundary. The first is potentially a source of authorisation for the latter. Indeed, some sector networks create formal mechanisms to authorise sector representatives. In addition, informal contacts both within and across sectors may lead to authorisation –
sometimes because a more formal agreement is achieved via this informal relationship, but perhaps more often because individuals reach shared interpretation of an issue, and shared language with which to describe that issue to others.

The account of leadership in this study takes place then in a context where leaders who are formally authorised interact with those whose authority is embedded in the informal and relational. The latter will frequently push beyond even this informal authority to challenge formally authorised participants to hear their interpretation of complex social problems. It is then possible to think about leadership in the inter-organisational context in terms of ‘making things happen’ (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a) through processes of influence between differently authorised participants. In this context, leadership is focused on the interpretation and framing of social problems and responses to those problems, and on directing the attention of partners towards these interpretations (Heifetz, 1994). The participant leader reaches beyond her authority to interpret and ‘makes sense’ of social problems, and engage partners who are formally authorised (and outwardly more powerful) in shared sensemaking (Pye, 2005).

The processes through which collaboration participants influence formally authorised partners, as identified in this study, are not the processes of formalised decision-making, but rather everyday social practice. One process through which this is enacted is in the construction of links between interpersonal relationships and the local implementation of policy, with its associated public agency dominated processes. A second is the tactic of ‘collaborative disruption’, echoing Heifetz’s account of the ‘creative deviance’ (Heifetz 1994 p. 183ff) of leaders who act without or beyond formal authority. Leaders beyond authority can direct
attention, influence the flow of information, and impact on the framing of the debate, even
when they are unable to impact on the processes of decision-making. They have no
responsibility to take a wider perspective, or manage the holding environment, and this gives
them space to stand on a single issue, to be creative, and deviate from the norm (ibid p.188).
Slowly, they engage others to see alternative perspectives:

‘These people – perceived as entrepreneurs and deviants, organizers and
troublemakers – provide the capacity within the system to see through the blind spots
of the dominant viewpoint...People such as these push us to clarify our values, face
hard realities, and seize new possibilities...’ (ibid p.183-4)

In this sense, the tactics of collaborative disruption can be understood as a practice of
leadership beyond authority, the purpose of which is to influence those with (formal)
authority. This in turn draws attention to the kind of outcomes collaborative disrupters might
hope to achieve. Framing this in Drath et al’s (2008) terms (Direction, Alignment,
Commitment), collaborative disruption is a tactic which is intended to move the direction of
the collaboration, re-align the partners, and engage the commitment of more powerful
partners to this new direction.

The metaphor of ‘interweaving into the collaborative fabric’ gives some insight into the
multiple iterative processes through which leaders beyond authority achieve these outcomes.
Social practices which make sense, direct attention, provide alternative frames for complex
social issues, and engage others in those alternatives, achieve (or fail to achieve) direction,
alignment and commitment (DAC). Frequently, these practices extend beyond those which are
immediately observable. A web of interwoven interactions lies behind the practices observed in public meetings. To achieve DAC these interactions link together key contextual factors, creating layers of connectivity between interpersonal relationships, policy implementation, collaborative processes, and partnership identity. This perspective affirms the view of leadership as a social practice which is both constituted by context, and contributes to the constitution of context, in a continually dynamic process (Grint, 2005b).

However, this is not to suggest that the myth of the individual heroic leader has no relevance to the collaborative practice explored in this study. Interestingly, the account of leadership without and beyond authority (Heifetz, 1994) presented here suggests that the narrative of the leader as charismatic individual, which is evident through so much of the history of leadership theory (Hunt, 1999), is by no means dead. Its significance is evidenced in the way in which individuals talk about their own leadership and the leadership of others. A discourse of individual significance and centrality threads through the interview texts. As indicated in Chapter 2, this sense of the unique individual is frequently perpetuated within the literature. While adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz, 1994) highlights the leadership role of the participant at the bottom of the table, as well as that of the individual at the top of the table, Heifetz’s examples in his seminal text are largely well-known and apparently extra-ordinary individuals, such as Martin Luther King and Gandhi. The question as to whether individuals who lead in these immensely challenging contexts are in some way unique remains unanswered, even as the theory encourages practitioners to think that we all have the potential to lead. The belief that it is individuals who can make a difference continues to impact on leadership practice.
This discussion of collaborative practice in the light of leadership theory suggests that the practice of collaboration participants in asymmetric collaborative relationships is recognisable as leadership practice. It suggests that leadership is enacted through multiple interwoven micro processes of discourse and relationship building. This account has similarities to Huxham and Beech’s (2008) account of the multiple micro ‘points of power’ at which overtly less powerful partners are able to move the collaboration agenda forward. It reinforces evidence in the literature that the tactics of leadership in collaborative contexts will include practices which appear manipulative, rather than collaborative, in style (Page, 2003, Vangen and Huxham, 2003b). In addition, it suggests that approaching the study of leadership in asymmetric collaborative contexts in terms of the engagement of leaders who are authorised in different ways provides a useful lens for understanding their practice.

7.8 Holding the ‘collaborative fabric’ tight – a story of risks and tensions

I have presented here a view of collaboration from the voluntary sector perspective, drawing on the image of weaving together a ‘collaborative fabric’ to describe practices which contribute to the development of an environment in which formal and informal collaborative spaces are continually shaped and re-shaped. The fabric is multi-layered, and the threads woven in by voluntary sector participants are by no means the most dominant, but these threads can link together the different layers of collaboration, and consequently make a distinct contribution to the ever-changing pattern. This contribution is frequently enabled through relationships with public sector counterparts, and takes the form of discursive strategies. These discursive strategies contribute to the development of ongoing collaborative
conversation, which reflects the need for both unity and diversity, surfacing that which is different, as well as that which is shared. In this context, voluntary sector participants can be seen acting ‘in the spirit of collaboration’, building links, and interweaving, but also towards ‘collaborative disruption’, challenging, questioning, surfacing alternatives to dominant public policy narratives, which tend toward the halting of dominant policy led narratives, and bring new elements into the design of the weave.

In the discussion which follows, I will explore the tensions which arise for voluntary sector leaders from this account of cross-sector collaboration. In the initial discussion, I use the term ‘tensions’ as a descriptor of the experience of participants in collaboration – of being pulled in two directions at once, maintaining a precarious balance between opposing ‘goods’, and their corresponding risks; and of experiencing engagement in collaboration as a site of apparently competing ‘realities’. The ‘dilemma’ is then in choosing how to respond to such tensions. I will go on to explore the relationship between these experienced tensions and the concept of underlying, inherent tensions which is found in the IOR literature.

7.8.1 ‘Tensions’ as a descriptor

Three key areas of tension for voluntary sector leaders emerged from analysis. These were initially recognised in participants’ activities, identified from interview texts and observations, but are also conveyed through participants’ imagery, which is here used to illustrate these experiences of tension. The three areas of tension are summarised in the table below:
Autonomy/Dependence | Focuses on the individual’s sense of their ability to make a difference, in a context which they understand to be substantially in the control of the public sector.
---|---
Values/Pragmatism | Focuses on the individual’s commitment to values rooted in voluntary sector identity, but acceptance of a more pragmatic approach in collaborative practice, which dilutes that contribution.
Distinctiveness/Incorporation | Focuses on the need for VCO leaders to maintain independence and a distinctive voice on behalf of organisation, sector and community, whilst also ensuring that their organisation is perceived as supportive to dominant public sector agencies.

| Table 11: Tensions as descriptors of the voluntary sector experience |

### 7.8.1.1 Autonomy/Dependence

The experience of leading in cross-sector collaborative contexts is one in which individuals both encounter an inability to make an impact and continue to maintain they can make a difference.

The former experience is conveyed through one participant’s imagery of participation in collaboration as a roller coaster ride in which the direction of travel is determined by the public sector. (See Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion of this imagery.) This imagery reinforces the sense that for the individual the experience of collaborating is one of disempowerment, in spite of the policy rhetoric of New Labour’s ‘partnership’ (Lewis, 2005) and the Coalition’s ‘Big Society’ (Alcock, 2010a, Evans, 2011). It suggests that the individual has no autonomy, and must simply work with her organisation’s dependence on dominant public sector agencies, ensuring the relationship is as positive and productive as possible.

On the other hand, this study also shows that individual VCO leaders do speak out despite this dependency, challenging and persuading public agencies, frequently risking damage to the
dependent relationship, and consequently to the organisation’s viability, in the process.

Despite their sense of disempowerment, individuals in this study actively engage in weaving together the layers of the ‘collaborative fabric’, using words and ideas, drawing on their identification with a distinct voluntary sector, offering alternatives, supporting and disrupting, and weaving into seemingly impenetrable processes through the layer of interpersonal relationships. This suggests that while individual autonomy is limited and constrained, it is by no means absent. Participants present themselves as agents of social change, advocates of community interests, and builders of ‘bridges from the margins’ (Ospina and Foldy, 2010), even as they affirm public sector dominance, and their own disempowerment. This tension between the experience of disempowerment on the one hand, and identification as autonomous agent of social change on the other plays out in the many ways in which individuals find ways to ‘work around’ public sector dominated processes, out of sight of accountability frameworks, enacted in the context of interpersonal relationships, slowly impacting on dominant public sector narratives of policy, need, and practice solutions through backstage conversations.

This tension is similar to the autonomy/interdependence tension described in the collaboration literature (O’Leary and Bingham, 2009b), but is specific to the experience of participants from organisations which frequently appear dependent, constraining the autonomy of individual actors. Consequently, dilemmas arise which are specific to the experiences of voluntary sector participants. The dilemmas which partnership managers face relate to who they include in the collaboration, whether to surface the aims of all participants, and how to encourage participants to identify with the collaboration (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). In contrast, voluntary sector participants face dilemmas related to when they should accept public sector
dominated processes and narratives, and when and how they can intervene to make a
difference:

- Determining when to take on a role as sector representative in partnership groups
  where the agenda appears to be determined by the public sector, and when to stay
  outside such processes, believing that this gives one a greater opportunity of making a
difference.
- Whether, when, and how far to express disagreement when to do so may damage the
  relationship with the dominant public sector agency, or with key individuals within that
  agency.
- When to attempt to make a difference, and when to accept public sector control.
- When to disengage from formal processes, and when to stay engaged, despite a sense
  that nothing is achieved.
- When to ‘work around’ public sector dominated processes through interpersonal
  relationships, risking credibility as a collaboration participant.

On one side of the autonomy/dependence tension is the individual who sees herself as an
agent of social change, whose purpose is to ‘make a difference’. On the other side of the
tension are the structural realities of the cross-sector relationship – public sector dominance of
collaborative processes, of decision-making, commissioning arrangements, and service
delivery, and control of resources, all of which suggest that the individual can make very little
difference. This tension reflects the classic agency/structure debate in social sciences
(O’Donnell, 2010): here I do not in any way attempt to resolve that debate, but simply to
reflect on how this is experienced at the level of day to day practice. Individual voluntary sector boundary spanners must live with and manage this tension.

7.8.1.2 Values/Pragmatism

A second closely related area of tension arises over whether and when to make a stand on values associated with the cause of the individual’s organisation, the community it seeks to serve, and the wider sector, and when to take a more pragmatic approach. A values based approach resonates with the narrative of a distinct, independent, and purposeful sector; a more pragmatic approach focuses on what is practicable and achievable, potentially compromising values, in order to work within the constraints of public sector dominance. Individuals engaged in collaboration face repeated dilemmas as to when to stand by these values, and when to compromise for the good of the collaboration.

This tension reflects but is distinct from that of ideology and pragmatism as faced by partnership managers (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a). For partnership managers, the focus is on integrating collaboration participants and achieve consensus. Their dilemma then is to determine when to act in line with an ideology of participation and engagement, at the risk of failing to achieve integration, and when to act in more manipulative ways, which achieve integration, but compromise the participative ideology. Frequently, this leads them to engage in activities which both facilitate collaboration by embracing, empowering, including and mobilizing participants, whilst at the same time, they also exclude participants, impose their own understanding of key issues, make decisions on behalf of others, and influence the agenda
via backstage manipulative behaviour (ibid). Moving the collaboration forward here appears more important than always adopting a facilitative style of leadership.

Voluntary sector participants encounter similar dilemmas, but from their distinctive perspective. They too engage in backstage manipulative behaviour to make things happen, but here the focus is not on the whole collaboration, and the achievement of integration, but rather on achieving their end of promoting their organisation, its purpose, and the wider voluntary sector. This relates to their assertion of and commitment to a distinctive voluntary sector identity which is rooted in values of openness, transparency and inclusion, and a ‘different’ understanding of community problems and potential solutions. This sense of sector identity and associated values provide the basis for challenge to the public sector: they are at the root of the sector’s distinctive contribution to collaboration. However, in order to influence the collaborative agenda and make things happen, participants demonstrate willingness to adopt a pragmatic approach, and to compromise these values, in order to maintain the collaborative relationship and make things happen. Examples include:

- By-passing accountability through backstage informal processes.
- Negotiating contracts through informal mechanisms which exclude other VS participants.
- Supporting the priorities of public sector agencies (or at least remaining silent), even when these conflict with the priorities and values of local VCOs, in order to maintain the collaborative relationship for the future.
- Deciding whether to oppose public sector policy and priorities on the basis of values associated with voluntary sector identity and an interpretation of community needs even though this is likely to damage the cross sector relationship.

The values/pragmatism tension reflects Weber’s (1946) account of tension between ends and means. This tension is between two irreconcilable positions - an ‘ethic of ultimate ends’, which holds to values without taking account of the likely consequences, and may consequently be perceived as irresponsible; and an ‘ethic of responsibility’ which takes account of the foreseeable results of actions, but may be viewed as unprincipled and opportunistic (Weber, 1946). There is no simplistic resolution to be found, but an awareness that there are consequences to both extremes will help practitioners to face the dilemmas which arise, and to determine when to continue to hold firm to values despite the consequences, and when to compromise values and move forward pragmatically.

This is illustrated in one participant’s description of herself as an ‘undercover cop’. Despite her assertion that she is committed to transparency as a guide to practice, she chooses to appear no different from those around her, believing that she can best promote her organisation’s purposes, and maintain the collaborative relationship, from this position. Here the word ‘cop’ conveys a sense of the significance of the work in terms of its association with values - ‘doing right’, and justice, while the word ‘undercover’ conveys a sense of compromise, of hidden identity. The metaphor conveys the sense of being in an unfamiliar world in collaboration, of bringing values and a distinct identity into that world, but being aware that this must be handled carefully, and revealed only at the right time and in the right way. It highlights the dilemma of determining when to speak out and when be silent, when to compromise and
when to refuse to do so. Again, this research suggests that these dilemmas are a regular experience for voluntary sector participants in cross-sector collaboration.

7.8.1.3 Distinctiveness/Incorporation

The image of the ‘undercover cop’ highlights a further area of tension for the voluntary sector leader’s experience of cross-sector collaboration as that of both the ‘insider’, who is incorporated within the collaboration, and that of the ‘outsider’, who is in some way always different. On the one hand, the public sector world is experienced as alien – in its bureaucracy, systems and processes. Familiarisation with this world, talking the language, understanding the processes, cooperating on its priorities, these all facilitate access to resources, increased business opportunities, and acceptance into strategic conversations. A cop who is undercover acquires knowledge, and information, and adopts the cultural practices of those around him. However, too much attention to familiarisation risks incorporation into the public sector agenda, compromising identification with voluntary sector distinctiveness. There is, therefore, a continuing need for voluntary sector leaders both to identify themselves with the collaboration, and to assert their identity as outside the collaboration, identifying themselves with the independence of their organisation and its mission, in order to avoid simply disappearing undercover.

Again, this tension leads to dilemmas for the voluntary sector participant:

- Whether and when to surface differences in aims and purpose, and when to allow these differences to be submerged beneath shared activities.
- When to act to implement public policy, and how to distinguish the voluntary sector contribution when doing so.
- When to accept the banner of public services, and when to insist on recognition of the voluntary sector contribution.

This insider/outsider tension is again conveyed through participants’ imagery. The first participant’s working life is based in a school:

‘I’m here physically every day, these are the people that I see… I never wanted to be the outsider, because I wanted – so anything else you have to try the shoes on, you have to sit in the skin... you’re outside inside something – it’s a weird place to be straddling. But you do hear and absorb a lot...’ (Charlotte)

A second participant asserts,

‘...partnership work means me straddling different realities I suppose.’ (Eric)

This second quote conveys a sense of the experience of relating to two competing realities – of relating to an ‘us and them’ dichotomy, where the voluntary sector leader who wants to exert influence must inhabit ‘their’ world, but also remain identified with a distinct voluntary sector world. On the one hand, there is a risk of complete absorption and incorporation into the public sector dominated world of cross-sector collaboration; on the other hand, standing too far apart from this world means there is no basis for collaboration to happen at all. The
voluntary sector leader faces repeated dilemmas with regard to when to surface difference, and when to subdue its expression.

The distinctiveness/incorporation tension highlights the significance of narratives of sector identity for practitioners (Macmillan, 2013). It suggests that apparently competing narratives of sector dependence and independence can be used as discursive tools in collaborative contexts, enabling participants to assert ‘sameness’ and ‘distinctiveness’ almost simultaneously. I observed this speedy transition between ‘we are like you’ and ‘we are nothing like you’ in the discursive strategies voluntary sector participants used in partnership meetings, as they affirmed and welcomed public sector strategies, and then quickly asserted a different perspective. This reinforces the significance of discourse as a source of legitimacy and leverage (Hardy and Phillips, 1998b) for voluntary sector participants, but also reflects the tension between values and pragmatism explored above. In addition, it also evidences the discomfort which voluntary sector participants frequently convey as they ‘straddle’ the inside/outside divide.

7.8.2 Inherent tensions

I have introduced three inter-related areas of tension as descriptors of the experience of voluntary sector participants. These experienced tensions also, though, relate to the underlying tensions which the IOR literature identifies as inherent in collaborative contexts (see Chapter 2). Researchers suggest that these tensions are inevitable due to the paradoxical nature of inter-organisational collaboration (Connelly et al., 2008, Huxham and Vangen, 2005,
Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010). Here, I explore the relationship between voluntary sector participants’ experience of tensions and the tensions which the literature suggests are ‘inherent’ – unity/diversity and dialogue/confrontation. As indicated in the discussion of collaborative disruption above, I will argue that the need for both dialogue and confrontation is not an inherent tension, but rather a necessary tactical response to the unity/diversity tension. In addition, I argue that a ‘power tension’ is inherent in cross-sector collaboration.

7.8.2.1 Unity/Diversity

Experiences of tension around issues of autonomy, values and incorporation relate to participants’ understanding of the distinct contribution which they can make to cross-sector collaboration as voluntary sector participants. I have previously noted Macmillan’s conclusion (Macmillan, 2013) that, although sector distinctiveness is difficult to define, individuals repeatedly assert the significance of a narrative of distinctiveness. It is at the heart of voluntary sector participants’ assertion that they have something different to offer – a distinct thread in the weave of the ‘collaborative fabric’. This thesis has demonstrated the difficulty of surfacing this distinctive voluntary sector voice in the context of cross-sector collaboration which is dominated by public sector agencies and national policy.

Yet, collaboration theorists argue that the achievement of collaborative advantage (when organisations achieve more together than they could alone) depends on the distinctive contribution of each participating organisation being brought into the whole, as synergy is drawn from difference (Huxham and Vangen, 2005). Consequently, expression of voluntary sector distinctiveness is essential to the collaboration, as well as to the voluntary sector
participant, even though it may result in conflict and difficulties between the collaborating parties. This assertion reflects the paradoxical need in inter-organisational collaboration for both unity and diversity, and consequently for both integration and differentiation (Ospina and Saz Carranza 2010, Saz Carranza and Ospina 2011). If a tension between unity (that which participants have in common) and diversity (their differences and distinctiveness) is inherent in inter-organisational collaboration, then the challenges voluntary sector leaders face in expressing distinctiveness, whilst maintaining a supportive relationship which enables them to engage with the collaboration, are to be expected. Indeed, the absence of such challenges may imply that the voluntary sector participant (and potentially the organisation(s) she represents) have been so incorporated into the public sector dominated collaboration that they no longer have anything distinctive to offer. On the other hand, too much emphasis on distinctiveness and difference means that there is insufficient commonality on which to build a collaborative relationship.

7.8.2.2 Dialogue/Confrontation

Secondly, the experiences of voluntary sector participants surfaced in this research reflect the dialogue/confrontation tension which Ospina and Saz Carranza (2010) assert is also inherent in collaboration. This tension highlights the need to maintain dialogue, even while confronting areas of disagreement. Rather than opting for either a relationship of dialogue or a

19 Ospina and Saz Carranza (2010) refer to the need for unity and diversity both as a paradox, and as a tension which draws on the paradoxical need for unity and diversity. I choose to adopt the descriptor ‘tension’ for the sake of consistency, and because this tension does not in my view comply with the definition of a paradox as ‘something which involves contradictory, mutually exclusive elements that are present and operate equally at the same time’ (Cameron and Quinn, 1988).
confrontational relationship, this tension acknowledges that both are fundamental to influencing an ‘institutional target’. From the perspective of voluntary sector participants, this highlights the need, identified earlier in this chapter, to disrupt and challenge their dominant public sector partners, even while engaging in activities which are more supportive and facilitative, ‘in the spirit of collaboration’.

However, in this study the need for both dialogue and confrontation differs from that described by Ospina and Saz Carranza (2010). In their research, they focus on networks of organisations which act together to impact on large institutional public sector agencies, which are outside the network. Consequently, the work of dialogue and confrontation is focused on the outward facing work of the whole network. In the current study, the focus is on the aim of voluntary sector actors to influence the ‘institutional target’, which is also the lead and controlling agency for the collaboration. In other words, the need for both dialogue and confrontation may be aimed either inwards or outwards, depending on the position of the institutional target – outside or within the collaboration.

The findings of this research also suggest that dialogue and confrontation are tactics of collaborative practice which arise from the underlying unity/diversity tension, rather than constituting an ‘inherent tension’. I argue that supportive dialogue (which builds on what is common) on the one hand, and more oppositional tactics of confrontation or disruption on the other, can be understood as tools for the management of the unity/diversity tension, focused on influencing dominant institutional parties. The need for both of these tactics in order to influence dominant institutional parties is here encapsulated in the concept of Collaborative Disruption.
7.7.2.3 A power tension?

However, the findings of this study do suggest the existence of a second inherent tension alongside that of unity/diversity. Here, I argue that voluntary sector participants’ experiences of engaging in cross-sector collaboration reflect an inherent ‘power tension’, which relates to the simultaneous need to assert the independence of collaborating organisations from each other, and their simultaneous dependence on each other. It reflects the authorisation of the state and concentration of its resources in public sector collaborators. Recognising asymmetries of power between the collaborating parties, the greater dependence of one on the other, is fundamental to managing this tension. So too is a recognition of the basis of an organisation’s assertion of independence.

This approach to the management of the power relationship in cross-sector collaboration differs from the more common approach in the IOR literature (as discussed in the literature review section 2.5.2), which is to assert the need for a ‘power balance’, in order for collaboration to be effective. Rather than focusing on finding ways to re-balance the relationship, living with the power tension implies adopting strategies which both accept and seek to work within power asymmetries and at the same time challenge them. I have previously argued that for voluntary sector participants this frequently means asserting independence, whilst working within a relationship of resource dependence. This closely relates to voluntary sector participants’ experiences of dilemmas as to when to compromise values for the sake of the collaboration, when to assert distinctiveness, and when to be quiet. I
argue here that these dilemmas are played out against the underlying power tension, as well as the unity/diversity tension.

**7.8.3 Interim conclusions - tensions**

This research affirms the findings of previous research that tensions and dilemmas at the level of day to day experience are endemic in collaborative practice, reflecting tensions which are inherent in inter-organisational collaboration. However, the research also challenges previous perspectives on which tensions are inherent. Here I suggest that the tensions which individuals encounter relate also to their own position in relation to the collaboration, and to their organisation’s position in relation to the power structures of the collaboration. Hence, voluntary sector participants’ experience of tensions is similar to but different from those of partnership managers. This relates to their position in collaborating organisations which are trying to influence organisations which are co-collaborators, from a position of public sector dominance.

This affirms Provan and Kenis’s (2008) assertion that tensions encountered in collaborative contexts relate to the form of governance of a collaboration, and specifically to whether the collaboration is ‘brokered’ by a dominant agency. However, in this research the governance form is conceptualised as just one aspect of the power relationship between the collaborating organisations. The power relationship is not limited to governance arrangements, but rather pervades cross-sector relationships at formal and informal levels.
For voluntary sector participants, the consequences of the power tension are experienced in their sense of their ability to ‘make a difference’, or not, as they work across the sector divide to persuade their public sector counterparts of the distinctiveness and value of the voluntary sector contribution. Consequently they encounter repeated dilemmas, which require them to determine how to act in the light of the power tension, deciding when to compromise and focus on relationship building, and when to stand by a values-based approach, rooted in a distinct understanding of community needs and service models.

7.9 Implications for practice

In this next section I explore the implications for practice of the concepts and approaches to collaboration discussed in this chapter, suggesting how different aspects of the research might be developed to provide tools which are useful for reflective collaborative practice, and for the facilitation of voluntary sector engagement in collaboration with public agencies. These are initial reflections on the implications of the research which could be developed into practical tools in consultation with practitioners themselves. This section should not then be read as advice, but rather as pointers for further reflection and development at the practice level.

7.9.1 Collaborative conversations

This research affirms both the significance and the difficulty of surfacing a voluntary sector perspective in collaborative contexts which are public sector dominated, particularly where commissioning processes and contracts may have the effect of closing down differences in
pursuit of public sector policy and priorities. Yet, such differences are essential to the achievement of collaborative advantage. This affirmation has practice implications for leaders on both sides of the sector divide.

For public sector commissioners and strategy managers, it is important to find ways to maintain ‘collaborative conversations’ through which participants can challenge and disrupt, as well as support, even in the context of contractual agreements. Facilitating such conversations alongside commissioned arrangements may superficially appear to be somewhat contradictory practice – while contracts specify and require compliance, conversations surface alternatives. However, such facilitation may be essential, not only to voluntary sector purposes, but more broadly to the achievement of collaborative advantage, and consequently to the collaboration, to public sector agencies, and most importantly to the individuals and communities they serve. This is a significant practice for the development of a wider collaborative environment (‘collaborative fabric’) which facilitates inter-organisational capability, and enables specific collaborative spaces, both formal and informal.

This is not to refute advice to partnership managers on the importance of integrating and aligning the aims and contributions of collaboration participants (Crosby and Bryson, 2005), but it is to affirm the view of researchers who advocate that the work of integration should be allied to that of differentiation (Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010). Reviewing collaborative practice to ensure there are spaces for alternative interpretations, challenge and disruption to be surfaced is a key first step which public sector managers can take, in order to assess how the local collaborative environment facilitates cross-sector collaboration (or not). Collaborative practice which welcomes such challenges, and embeds them in public sector led
collaborative processes, might be described as the development of inter-organisational mindfulness (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). A state of mindfulness resists the urge to simplify, encourages awareness of and learning from failure, and defers to expertise rather than hierarchy (ibid p.71-74).

The voice of the collaborative partner which questions, challenges, even undermines, may be key to mindfulness in the children’s services context, where questions of interpretation are crucial to children’s wellbeing, and failure to attend to early warning signs can result in children’s deaths. The development of inter-organisational mindfulness through collaborative conversations could potentially provide a balance to the tendency of public agencies toward closing down meaning and failing to challenge interpretations, which has repeatedly been identified by service reviews as an issue in understanding and responding to the needs of children, families, and communities (Parton, 2004, Parton, 2009). The Climbie review of 2003 and the Munro review of 2011, although not specifically referencing the voluntary sector, both emphasised the importance of professionals’ confidence to question the interpretations of their colleagues. Munro also called for a new culture of learning across agency boundaries, providing continual feedback into the child protection system (Munro, 2011). Working with voluntary sector colleagues to challenge accepted meanings and surface alternative interpretations might provide an opportunity to build into the system micro processes of continual review, checks and balances, which all too often have been lacking from practice. This is clearly a difficult thing to ask of public services and their managers, particularly at a time of public sector funding cuts, and an increasing tendency towards ‘evidence based practice’.

However, failure to facilitate these complex collaborative conversations, which multiply potential meanings, rather than closing them down, can have hugely negative consequences.
for children and families and their communities, as well as for organisations in both public and voluntary sectors.

For voluntary sector participants who experience the disempowerment of working with dominant public agencies, this research suggests that drawing on discourse to challenge, question and offer alternatives, can be a significant source of power (Hardy and Phillips, 1998b). In the short term, discursive strategies, in the form of challenge to public sector policy narratives and interpretations of community needs, can have the effect of slowing down or halting local policy and priorities, and holding public agencies, their policies and practices to account. In the longer term, alternative narratives, particularly when allied to examples of good practice and community transformation, can have the effect of transforming local practice across sectors. This relates closely to advice to voluntary sector practitioners on managing sector ‘voice’ (Hirschman, 1970), but in the collaboration context draws attention to how that voice becomes part of a collaborative conversation.

Promoting and engaging in collaborative conversations which contribute to a robust collaborative environment (fabric), will almost inevitably place voluntary sector leaders in vulnerable positions, as individuals, and in relation to their organisation, as they raise differences, challenge and disrupt, in contexts which are closely tied to commissioned arrangements and joint service delivery. Again, this is particularly significant in a context of public sector cuts, where individuals might fear that expressions of difference will potentially impact on future funding. This raises questions as to how individuals protect themselves and their colleagues in such conversations, and what support they can expect from their organisations. How could large voluntary organisations best provide support for individuals
who do this work on their behalf from within management structures, and how do individuals who work for small VCOs find such support? How can ‘collaborative disrupters’ practice safely – for their own credibility and their organisation’s future? These questions reinforce the sense highlighted elsewhere in this study that risk is endemic to the experience of voluntary sector collaborators. However, one key area which has been touched upon here, but not fully explored is the significance of voluntary sector led forums and networks in enabling these complex collaborative conversations, and providing support to individual collaborative disrupters. Several examples of such conversations observed in this research were held in or with the support of such networks.

7.9.2 Analysing collaborative spaces and the collaborative environment

This research also provides an initial framework for understanding voluntary/public sector collaboration, which may be useful for developing diagnostic tools for analysis of both specific examples of collaboration (referred to above as ‘collaborative spaces’), and of the wider collaborative environment (‘collaborative fabric’). As emergent conceptualisations, they provide ‘handles’ for reflection on collaborative practice (Huxham and Beech, 2003).

The concept of ‘collaborative fabric’ suggests that the multiple connections which collaborative practitioners make across organisational and sector boundaries can all be significant in developing the multi-layered interconnectedness which provides an environment which facilitates further collaboration. Examples of collaboration develop and flourish in an environment in which there is an abundance of connections across the multi-layered fabric. Consequently, leaders from VCOs may find it useful to map these connections across the layers
of policy, processes, relationships, and participant identity, and to reflect on the source of these connections, and their resilience or vulnerability.

These same four factors (policy, processes, relationships, and participant identity), and the relationship between them, can also be used to analyse specific collaborative spaces, whether formal entities, or informal relationships. Determining how each example of cross-sector collaboration is impacted by each of these factors, which dominates, and how they interact, will provide useful insight for voluntary sector leaders who are seeking to exert influence on the agenda of the collaboration. Reflective practitioners will want to ask themselves questions which emerge from this analysis.

For example, a formal partnership board might be analysed as generated in response to policy, but in practice dominated by processes. A VCO leader, receiving an invitation to represent the voluntary sector at an initial board meeting, perceives these processes as seemingly inaccessible, but recognises sufficient areas for between the policy agenda and the current concerns of the local voluntary sector for her to determine that engagement is worthwhile. However, when she attends the meeting, the discussion is dominated entirely by process (form of the meetings, membership, terms of reference etc), and rarely touches on substantive policy issues. I suggest below some key questions which reflective practitioners might ask themselves in a context which they analyse in this way.
Key questions for voluntary sector practitioners in a process dominated collaborative space:

- Is there sufficient overlap between the policy focus of the collaborative space and my understanding of voluntary sector identity to make it worthwhile for me to engage further in this collaborative space?
- How could I increase the policy focus of the board in a way which reflects voluntary sector identity, given that the processes of compiling the agenda, submitting position papers, and determining follow-up actions appear inaccessible and in the control of public agencies?
- Can I access processes via relationships with key individuals?
- Do I, or do others in my organization, already have such relationships?
- What impact might those relationships have on the collaborative space?
- How could relationships help me push forward a distinctive narrative of a VS understanding of the problem, and potential responses?
- Why does policy currently have such a small impact on this collaboration, and does this suggest that this example of collaboration is not a high priority as it is not policy driven?
- Should it then be a continuing priority for me?
- What would be the impact on the wider collaborative fabric if I pulled out?

Box 13: Key questions for practitioners
This example demonstrates that analysing specific examples of collaboration through these four factors can provide useful insight for practitioners. As a next step in this research, this approach should be developed further, working directly with practitioners.

7.9.3 Making sense of tensions

Researchers have previously suggested that practitioner experiences of tensions and dilemmas reflect underlying tensions in inter-organisational collaboration, and that consequently practitioners need to find ways to address tensions, rather than seeking to remove them (Huxham and Beech, 2003, Huxham and Vangen, 2005, Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010). This perspective suggests that tension cannot be finally resolved, other than by complete withdrawal from the context. This may mean finding a balance between competing demands, or seemingly opposing realities, sometimes choosing to address each at different times, but frequently addressing both simultaneously. At a minimum, understanding that such tensions are inevitable enables reflective practitioners to begin to address that inevitability, rather than striving against it.

I have argued that voluntary sector participants experience related but distinct tensions from partnership managers, or public sector collaborators, due to their position in relation to the collaboration. Participants’ use of metaphor at times reveals an awareness of the experience of tension which pulls them in different directions, and consequently provides an opportunity for further exploration. Understanding that tensions will arise around issues of autonomy, values and incorporation which relate to the underlying unity/diversity tension, and to the underlying power tension, enables individuals to manage their implications in day to day
practice. Again, insight leads to key questions for practice, which may help practitioners face the dilemmas which arise from these tensions. For example, the insight that autonomy will always be in tension with dependence may lead to the following questions:

- How far are there limits on my autonomy in this collaboration, and can I change those limits?
- To what extent must I ensure that my autonomy does not threaten the dependency relationship?

One approach to making sense of these tensions is evidenced in the exploration of metaphor in this research. This might provide a tool for further exploration and management of practitioners’ experience of collaboration. Facilitators could work with practitioners to explore these experiences through imagery and metaphor. Working with practitioners to draw out mental images of their experience of collaboration may provide an opportunity to ask why a particular collaborative space is experienced in this way, and which factors contribute to this experience; and to explore whether this experience is the same in a different collaborative space, impacted differently by these factors. Returning to the research question’s focus on sensemaking, exploring metaphor and imagery with practitioners may be a way of helping them to understand how and why they make sense of complex experiences, which seem to pull them in different directions.

Here I have suggested how this research might be applied to practice: these initial thoughts could be developed further in collaboration with practitioners in order to develop tools which can be used in practice. It would therefore be useful to continue this study in the form of
action research based on facilitation of cross-sector collaboration in voluntary sector organisations.

7.10 Conclusions: addressing the research questions

This research has uncovered the practice of voluntary sector leaders who collaborate, on behalf of their organisations and of the wider sector, with public sector agencies in the context of children’s services. I have argued that the difficulties they have in making sense of their experiences is unsurprising: the sense of precarious balance, being pulled in different directions, and of riding in a roller coaster – these metaphors reflect tensions which are inevitable if voluntary sector participants are to maintain distinctiveness in a context of power asymmetry. They also provide insight into ways in which participants’ make sense of their experiences, suggesting a level of acceptance of the experience of tension, rather than a continual need to attempt to achieve resolution. This in turn provides some insight as to the kind of people who are attracted to the work of cross-sector collaboration.

The collaborative practice of voluntary sector leaders is frequently one of compromise and pragmatism, working around the barriers to participation and lack of access to decision-making. This is most clearly seen in the focus on maintaining and developing cross-sector collaboration through interpersonal relationships with key individuals in the public sector. These relationships by-pass the power relationship between organisations from different sectors, and instead are built on individual skills and expertise. Influence, on the collaborative agenda, public agencies, and their policies, is enabled through informal relationships, as
individuals ally themselves with the alternative narratives, interpretations, and ideas which they hear in backstage, unrecorded conversations, and take these into the public sector dominated processes of commissioning and partnership.

When opportunities arise, and when they can do so without permanently damaging the cross-sector relationship, voluntary sector representatives use these discursive strategies in formal meetings. All too often, this frontstage approach through the formal processes of collaboration appears frustratingly slow and tortuous – minutes are incomplete, alternative narratives are welcomed but result in no action, questions receive a minimal response. However, when combined with backstage lobbying through interpersonal relationships, there is a clearer change of language, and reconsideration of interpretations. This is not a quick win approach for voluntary sector leaders, but over time discursive strategies can link together the interpersonal relationships and the processes of collaboration, and begin to make a difference to the collaborative conversation, and consequently to the wider ‘collaborative fabric’.

This account highlights the significance of discursive strategies for voluntary sector collaborators, strategies which highlight personal and organisational expertise, which interpret and advocate on behalf of community need; narratives which interpret history and foretell potential futures; and questions which challenge dominant public sector narratives. This perspective reflects the view of leadership as meaning making (Pye, 2005, Smircich and Morgan, 1982). It also resonates with Macmillan and McLaren’s (2012) account of the significance of strategic narrative, as a discursive intervention for voluntary sector leadership. Voluntary sector leaders wanting to make a difference in a policy driven collaborative context draw on their identification with a distinctive voluntary sector perspective to speak into the
policy narrative, whether in support of, or to challenge that narrative and its implementation. They build links between relationships, processes, policy, and their sector identity, through discursive strategies, developing a distinctive sector voice, which contributes to the collaborative conversation, and over time to the development of a resilient collaborative environment. This challenges the perspective that the context for cross-sector collaboration is one which participants are unable to impact, and instead provides a view of practice and context as continually interacting in a dynamic relationship.

This understanding of voluntary sector practice is derived from a specific context in which inter-organisational collaboration is played out against the background of policy narratives of partnership, of the ‘joint’ and ‘shared’, but also of an increasing questioning of the independence of the voluntary sector. Participants in this study are well aware of the power asymmetry between their own sector and public sector agencies which are authorised and resourced by the state. This power asymmetry frames the context for collaboration between voluntary and public sectors. However, participants enact leadership without and beyond authority (Heifetz, 1994) to re-shape this context. They challenge policy narratives, but take the opportunities they present; they recognise their organisations’ dependence, but seek to maintain distinctive sectoral voice; as individuals they feel disempowered, but continually seek not only to ‘make things happen’ (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b), but also to ‘make a difference’.

This situated account of collaborative practice makes a contribution to the theory of collaboration, and the understanding of how leadership is enacted in the inter-organisational domain. Specifically, this account contributes to the account of leadership as enacted by
collaboration participants in contexts of asymmetric power. This contribution is made through the emergent conceptualisations of ‘collaborative disruption’, ‘collaborative fabric’, and the key contextual factors which impact on ‘collaborative spaces’. These concepts provide ‘handles’ for reflective practice and further research. In addition, this discussion proposes that approaching the study of leadership in collaborative contexts through an understanding of leadership without and beyond authority usefully focuses attention on the practices of leadership in contexts of asymmetric power.
Chapter 8

Reflexivity: a reflection on the research journey

8.1 Introduction

In this thesis I draw on a number of inter-related topics. I draw attention to the role of the voluntary sector, its identity and relationship with the state, and how individuals enact that relationship. I highlight the significance of policy – uncovering policy narratives, and absences from those narratives, and exploring the impact of policy on how individuals based in different sectors work together. As I write, I surface the complexities of trying to make things happen in a context where all the power seems to be in the hands of dominant public agencies. However, I am also aware that I offer a narrative in this thesis which draws on and is shaped by my own experience, as practitioner of collaborative partnership, voluntary sector advocate, turned researcher, and which, in turn, contributes to my understanding of the world of inter-organisational collaboration.

In this chapter, I will pause to reflect on the impact of my own professional background and identity on the research process, and on the impact of the research process back on my identity and, perhaps more significantly, on my changing expectations of the products of social research. The purpose of this reflection is not to attempt to remove all potential bias from the research, but rather to acknowledge that such projects are necessarily situated and limited, political and partial in nature. This is due in part to the background and beliefs of the researcher.
8.2 A reflexive pause

Qualitative researchers are advised that a reflexive pause in the narrative enables the researcher to examine her own impact and the impact of her ‘socio-historical location’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.15) on the research process and outcomes. While an overly introspective account runs the risk of accusations of navel gazing (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008), attention to reflexivity is an acknowledgement of the researcher’s role in crafting the realities she describes (Law, 2004). It builds on an understanding of social science research as presenting a version of the research topic which is impacted by language, social and political factors, theory and empirical material which are woven together through the choices, experiences and interpretive frameworks of the researcher (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). While it is difficult to find an agreed definition of reflexivity (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008), writers on this topic emphasise the value of surfacing the detail of the research process, its context, and the researcher’s biography (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, Law, 2004).

A reflexive pause opens up the active role of the researcher in framing the research at all stages, including the writing itself (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). It also opens up the processes of interpretation to the reader. Hammersely and Atkinson argue that the researcher is the ‘research instrument par excellence’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.17): hence the emphasis on making researcher choices and interpretations explicit. This inevitably draws attention to that which is excluded, and to potential alternative interpretations (Law, 2004). This is not to suggest that the researcher’s interpretation is in some way ‘untrue’, but rather to
point to the research process as an inevitable shaping of the ‘multiplicity’ of the social practices which are the object of social research (Law, 2004).

Throughout the thesis, I have attempted to surface details of process, revealing my ‘working out’ in order to share with the reader the repeated decisions and choices which are part of the research process. I have discussed in some detail the social, political and policy context of the study, and attempted to relate that context to the activities and words of participants, not in an attempt to assert generalisable causality, but rather in order to surface the complexity of practice in this environment. In the narrative which follows, I return to my own history, which, as outlined in the Introduction (Chapter 1), provided the initial motivation for this research, and explore how that history, together with the experience of engaging in this research project, have together contributed to the shaping of the research process and the final thesis.

8.3 The researcher’s journey

At the personal level, the research process has been a journey, both in my own learning, and in terms of my understanding of how my research might impact on practice. I brought to the work two key commitments - a continuing commitment to working in policy and practice to improve outcomes for children and families, and a continuing belief that the voluntary sector has a significant contribution to make to this work. These factors have impacted on my expectations as a researcher, and my hopes for the relevance of my work to practice. These hopes and expectations have probably been fulfilled in part, but they have also in turn been challenged through the processes of engaging with and constructing the research project.
As Hammersley and Atkinson state, qualitative research is always impacted by the researcher’s own biography, as well as by the socio-historical context (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Indeed, these authors suggest that rather than attempting to remove her own identity from the work in a vain attempt to achieve ‘neutrality’, the researcher is herself key to the narrative account she gives of the world:

‘We act on the social world and yet are able to reflect upon ourselves and our actions as objects in that world...By including our own role in the research focus, and perhaps even systematically exploiting our participation in the settings under study as researchers, we can produce accounts of the social world and justify them without placing reliance on futile appeals to empiricism...’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.18)

As indicated elsewhere, I had worked in both public and voluntary sectors before returning to the academic world. My qualification as a social worker, together with experience in project and organisational development gained in the voluntary sector, enabled me to access well-paid management posts in local authorities during the years of the Labour government’s expansion and reorganisation of children’s services. In both sectors, working across the sector boundary was a key part of the job role, and one which I welcomed, even though I increasingly experienced cross-sector collaboration as frustrating, and the collaborative relationship as one which too often appeared as far from ideal. When I later became an independent consultant, the focus of much of my work was on making cross-sector collaboration ‘work’, albeit in an increasingly challenging economic environment.
These experiences, my knowledge of the field, and range of personal contacts, together led me to make assumptions about the research which with hindsight were unhelpful. Firstly, I assumed that I would have no problem accessing research participants through former work contacts, but also through formal collaborative contexts (specifically Children’s Trust Boards), drawing on my knowledge and experience. In practice, this proved to be much more difficult than I had expected. I had failed to take adequate account of the impact of the rapidly changing social, political and economic environment. The economic context forced voluntary sector leaders into an ever-increasing focus on the survival of services and of organisations, which limited willingness and ability to participate in research, even for a former colleague. Several participants moved between organisations during the course of the research, while others experienced a continual change of responsibilities. In one example, I contacted a participant to explore the possibility of a follow-up interview, but received no reply. An internet search revealed that the interviewee had left the organisation where he had managed the re-negotiation, and consequent reduction of a large contract with a public agency, whilst also collaborating with that agency on service development and policy implementation. Some time later, I also noted that a major service had moved from this organisation into the management of a second voluntary organisation. Later still, the first organisation announced its closure. In other examples, trying to distance my research from a reliance on my own contacts, I contacted voluntary sector representatives to Children’s Trust Boards using lists retrieved from Children’s Trust websites. This resulted in no response at all, other than one somewhat suspicious enquiry as to how I had found the individual’s email address.
In the end, I accessed most participants through a snowball process, which started with contacts from previous work experience, or from forums I attended. These initial participants generously introduced me to their contacts, who in turn signposted me on to further colleagues. Positively, I believe that this method of personal commendation resulted in a level of access and openness on the part of participants which would otherwise have been unavailable to me. Our shared professional language, and interviewees’ assumption that I understood their position from my own experience, led to deeper and more detailed conversations. However, the combination of the economic environment and of the reorganisation and dismantling of some collaborative structures may have led interviewees to express a greater cynicism about the cross-sector relationship than they would have expressed some years earlier. All were negatively impacted in some way by public sector cuts, and some openly shared their personal political views, and frustrations with policy developments. At a personal level, I observed services being dismantled, where I had been involved in their implementation only a few years earlier, and the impact on individuals in both public and voluntary sectors.

Together with my initial commitment to the voluntary sector, this context may at times have led me to an overly negative interpretation of public sector policy and practice. However, this context also revealed to me the depth of the relationship between the dynamic social, political and economic environment and the everyday practice of voluntary sector leadership in the cross-sector context. This understanding has increasingly shaped the structure and content of the thesis as the research has progressed, drawing on an understanding that the ever-changing policies and priorities of government, and consequently of public sector agencies, play a key role in the experience of voluntary sector leaders.
A second assumption concerned my personal commitment to and belief in the role of voluntary sector organisations. This is not, of course, to suggest that I agree with them all (they do not in any case agree with each other), or that I believe that the practice of all VCOs and their leaders is somehow consistently more ethical than that of the public sector. I have encountered poor practice and dubious decision-making in both sectors. However, I do continue to assert the significance of voluntary sector organisations in society in general, and specifically in children’s services. This has led me to touch on issues of sector identity and distinctiveness in this thesis (issues which deserve further exploration in future research).

However, the research process has not led me to the point I envisaged at the beginning, when my aim was to develop clear advice for voluntary sector leaders. Instead, I have here uncovered their perspective, surfacing a perspective which is otherwise absent from the collaboration literature. At the end of the Discussion Chapter (Chapter 7 above), I have also reflected on the implications of the research for leaders from both sectors. However, I acknowledge that in order to make this research useful to practitioners, much more work must be done with practitioners themselves.

At an early stage of the research process, I was challenged by a fellow student who suggested that my work was biased towards the voluntary sector, and who asked why I did not take a more balanced approach to address issues which face leaders from both public and voluntary sectors. After an initial attempt to refute the claim of bias, I have instead embraced the opportunity to contribute a voluntary sector perspective to the inter-organisational collaboration literature, which I have suggested is otherwise dominated by two different perspectives – one from the public sector, and the other from the position of partnership
managers. I here acknowledge the political nature of the research (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000), and the deliberate privileging of the voluntary sector perspective.

This leads to the third key assumption which underlay my initial aims for the research. As a former consultant, I visualised myself returning to the world of practice at the end of the research project with advice for leaders in both voluntary and public sectors, advice which had the potential to improve collaborative practice. At the end of the project, I have much more modest ambitions about the nature and product of research, and a somewhat different sense of my own professional identity.

Like others who move into academic research from a background in practice (see for example Watt, 2007), I am aware of the transition which has taken place in my professional identity from ‘practitioner’ to ‘researcher’. This transition has inevitably contributed to the shaping of interactions with participants, interpretation of findings, and shaping of the narrative of the thesis. On returning to academia, and taking time to read both the academic and the policy literature, I was initially surprised to find much more complex narratives of cross-sector collaboration than I had experienced in practice. I realised that my reading in the context of practice had been somewhat superficial, and focused on instrumental purposes in terms of implications for my work. As a consequence, I had missed much of the ambiguity I now identify in policy texts. I had also been unaware of the considerable body of academic literature which draws attention to the challenges of collaboration, and presents participants’ experience of facing challenges and dilemmas as inevitable.
This opportunity to re-consider assumptions derived from experience was both a relief and a frustration. Positively, my reading suggested that experiences of partnership ‘failure’ could not be blamed entirely on the actions of myself and my colleagues – there was no simple, or even complex, formula here which we had missed, although I found plenty of good advice I wished I had read earlier. However, this also raised difficult questions for me – could I have delivered better services for children and their families over the course of my career if I had understood this more complex approach to inter-organisational collaboration earlier? In any case, does a ‘better’ understanding deliver better outcomes? How can I surface, rather than reducing complexity, through my written account of my research, whilst also avoiding the danger of suggesting that cross-sector collaboration is simply too difficult?

These questions have contributed to the shaping of the more modest conclusions to my research.

8.4 The research stages

My identity as a researcher-practitioner has had an impact on every stage of the research process. However, I have also tried at every stage to question assumptions brought into the research from practice. Here, I briefly reflect on ways in which I have challenged ‘familiarity’, and retained some ‘distance’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) from my research at different stages, in an attempt to make ‘the strange familiar so as to understand it, and to make the familiar strange, so as to avoid misunderstanding it’ (ibid p.231).
My reading of policy provides an example of these two aims. As indicated above, re-reading these texts in detail in the context of a research project challenged my assumption of familiarity with the policy field – it made policy strange to me. At the same time, this new understanding of the policy narrative provided a context for some of the ‘strangeness’ of practice.

The processes of collecting, storing, coding and retrieving data each provided further opportunities to continue to challenge my assumptions, and to assess my role in shaping the data and findings of the research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.157). I have already commented above on the difficulties of gaining access to participants, and the impact of working with individuals from a familiar world. Despite this familiarity, in the first interviews I conducted, my assumptions about a voluntary sector perspective were challenged. I was surprised by the strength of views regarding public sector dominance of partnership meetings and decision making, and the repeated expressions of unwillingness to challenge public agencies in formal meetings. I was also surprised by the strength of loyalty to individual colleagues from the public sector. These early findings challenged my sense of the world I was studying, and acted as a reminder to continually challenge my understanding through views expressed by participants.

I was also very aware at this early stage of participants’ assumptions about my familiarity with their world. My access to interviewees was built on my credibility as a former practitioner. Here the informal conversational style I adopted for interviews worked well in building a rapport, which enabled me to probe and search beyond initial responses. I believe that interviewees accepted this deeper questioning because they identified me as familiar with
their world. However, it may also mean that I missed some cues which would have been picked up by an interviewer who was less familiar with the field.

Transcribing interviews myself, rather than outsourcing this task, proved to be time well invested. The slow processes of listening and typing (I am not an audio typist) helped me to immerse myself in and become familiar with the data. This in turn informed the analysis stage, as I came to the task with a clearer sense of what interviewees had talked about (and not talked about). The use of analytical software to code the data helped me to separate the analysis from the familiar narrative of ‘partnership’ I brought from practice, by assisting me to return repeatedly to the detail of the data, and to apply codes to detailed data segments. In effect, this stage of the process forced me to focus on what interviewees said, rather than immediately imposing my own interpretation. Content analysing policy texts initially through electronic text searches and word counts had a similar effect of helping me to avoid moving too quickly to interpretation.

Again at the findings stage, I found it difficult not to move continually towards interpretation. In offering an account of the themes, and presenting examples of data from different perspectives, my aims were two-fold - firstly, to surface the process of moving from analysis to interpretation; and secondly to enable readers to determine themselves the coherence and credibility of this move.

Watt describes the value of writing continually throughout the different stages of the research process, and affirms how this increased her insight into her research topic, which, like mine, was familiar from practice (Watt, 2007). I have found that writing throughout the research
process, rather than waiting to write at the end, has helped me to continually question my assumptions, and push on my thinking. In my computer files, are numerous research memos, topic memos, and narrative accounts of ‘Early thoughts’ on the different aspects of the study. Although supervisors helpfully warned against ‘fixing’ thoughts by writing too early, I found that I could question my initial ideas when I saw them on the screen or paper. Also, like Watt, I found that writing helped me to manage the emergent, ever-changing nature of the qualitative research. The repeated crafting of the text and the nature and significance of the authorial voice have been repeated topics of discussion with academic supervisors, whose position outside the practitioner world, has been a constant challenge to any tendency to romanticise the work of the voluntary sector, or to ally myself too closely with their perspective.

8.5 Conclusion

The biggest impact of researching and writing a qualitative thesis is almost certainly the impact on the researcher herself – certainly that is how the experience appears to me, as I have gradually changed my identity, from that of a practitioner who is researching, to that of a researcher with a background in practice. In many ways, the result of the research process has been to limit my expectations of what can be achieved through academic research in terms of its applicability to practice, but it has also deepened my insight into the research topic and into my own practice. This reflexive pause acknowledges the learning journey of completing a PhD thesis. More importantly, it reminds me to continually challenge my assumptions, and to listen to the multiplicity of voices – academics and practitioners – in order to ensure that I continue the learning journey, and share that learning with others as I teach, train and consult.
Chapter 9

Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

In this final chapter, I summarise the thesis, and identify the contribution made by the research to the field of collaboration theory. I then acknowledge the limitations of the study, before going on to offer initial thoughts on how the research might continue beyond the PhD. Finally, I end the thesis with an epilogue which returns to where the study began – the needs of children.

9.2 Summary

This research brings a participant, specifically, voluntary sector, perspective to the literature of inter-organisational collaboration. Although the IOR literature suggests that leadership in collaboration can be enacted by all participants, and not simply those with management roles (see for example Crosby and Bryson, 2005, Huxham and Vangen, 2005, Williams, 2013), the roles and activities of participant leaders have not previously been distinguished from those of partnership managers and public managers. Here I build on the work of collaboration theorists (Huxham and Vangen, 2000b, Ospina and Foldy, 2010, Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010, Vangen and Huxham, 2003a), but also draw on key concepts in the voluntary sector literature, in order to explore the leadership of voluntary sector participants in collaborative contexts. This can be
understood as the practice of leadership beyond authority (Heifetz 1994). More specifically, the research focuses on collaboration participants whose authority is informal, embedded in relationship, and the ways in which they influence those participants whose authority is derived from hierarchy, and, ultimately, from the power of the state.

Drawing on the IOR literature, together with the findings of empirical research, I highlight the significance of participant identity in understanding the practice of cross-sector collaboration. Although it is difficult to identity a single narrative of voluntary sector identity, from either the voluntary sector literature or the empirical research, leaders from the sector continue to assert the significance of the sector’s distinctive role and contribution (Macmillan, 2013). The narrative of sector distinctiveness plays a key role in participants’ accounts of their experience of collaborating. Exploring the interaction between participant identity, processes, relationships, and policy provides a framework for diagnosing both specific examples of collaboration, and the wider environment. This research argues that cross-sector collaboration which is resilient draws on all four of these factors. Individual leaders contribute to this resilience by building links between these factors, frequently beginning with interpersonal relationships.

The research distinguishes then between the leadership of partnership managers and that of voluntary sector participants as leaders who ‘make things happen’ in collaborative contexts. This distinction relates to the individual’s relationship with the collaboration. While partnership managers have responsibility for moving forward the whole collaboration, participant leaders seek to re-direct the attention of the collaboration to issues related to the focus of the organisation(s) they represent, and their causes. As a consequence, tensions,
which are endemic in collaboration, are experienced differently by voluntary sector participants than by partnership managers.

The thesis identifies three tensions experienced by voluntary sector collaboration participants, focused on issues of autonomy, values, and incorporation. These experienced tensions relate to the underlying unity/diversity tension which is inherent in inter-organisational collaboration (Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010). I argue that they also reflect an inherent power tension, in which dependence and independence co-exist. While the tensions encountered by partnership managers result in behaviours which are both ‘in the spirit of collaboration’ and ‘towards collaborative thuggery’ (Vangen and Huxham, 2003a), the voluntary sector experience of tensions leads to behaviours which are both ‘in the spirit of collaboration’ and towards ‘collaborative disruption’. The thesis introduces the latter concept as a descriptor of practices which halt dominant public sector narratives, challenge priorities, and offer alternatives, within a context of ongoing collaboration.

The practices and experiences of voluntary sector leaders captured by this study take place in a context of continually changing policy, which leads to the continuing introduction, reconfiguration, and cessation of specific examples of cross-sector collaboration (‘collaborative spaces’). This leads to immense frustration for participants, and to a continuing sense of the reinvention of the cross-sector relationship. As a consequence, some voluntary sector participants move towards withdrawal from collaboration, but withdrawal inevitably leads to the loss of the distinctive voluntary sector voice at the collaboration table. I argue that a focus on the wider collaborative environment, the ‘collaborative fabric’, rather than on specific ‘collaborative spaces’, leads to a more positive perspective, in which voluntary sector leaders
can facilitate future collaboration by building multiple ties which interweave across the sector boundary, outliving individual collaborative spaces. Frequently, this interweaving begins with interpersonal relationships, from which participants link together the layers of collaboration, including processes, policy, and participant identity.

This interweaving produces limited short-term success for practitioners of collaboration, but over the long term builds capacity for collaboration across the sector boundary. Participants who actively build collaborative capacity over the long term embed themselves in the local leadership coalition (Purdue, 2005), but more importantly embed their organisation, the wider sector, and consequently multiple perspectives and understanding of community and social issues into the local ‘collaborative fabric’. This long-term view of collaboration contrasts with the often short-lived examples of policy-driven collaborative processes. It raises difficult questions for public agencies which are frequently focused on short-term solutions, and for voluntary organisations which are impacted by short-term public policy, and associated funding regimes.

In broader terms, this research indicates that context matters to cross-sector collaboration to tackle complex social problems. It matters in four key ways:

1. Firstly, the nature of the problems themselves. The example of services for children and families evidences the relentless nature of these social problems; the need for collaborative relationships over the longer term to address problems which lie in inter-organisational domains; the lack of final ‘solutions’; and the need for continual
processes of sensemaking to achieve shared understanding of the problems, and frame appropriate responses.

2. Secondly, in relation to the framing of collaboration for social purposes by government policy. Policy highlights the need for collaboration, and provides an enabling framework for public agencies to collaborate with key partners to address complex social problems. However, policy also constrains cross-sector collaboration, as it confirms and reinforces structural relationships of power, and limits the resources for collaboration.

3. Thirdly, at the local level where policy is implemented, collaborative processes are established, and interpersonal relationships are enacted across sector boundaries. Local context constrains collaboration when decisions regarding local policy implementation are made through processes which remain in the control of public agencies. However, when relationships at the interpersonal level interact with formal processes, so that collaborative conversations develop across the sector divide, then local context can provide an enabling environment for collaboration.

4. Fourthly, in relation to the identity of collaboration participants. The sense of identity (related to organisation and wider sector) brought into the collaboration by participants impacts on how that collaboration proceeds. Here I suggest that issues of sector identity and distinctiveness are significant in framing participants’ understanding of their role and responsibilities in the cross-sector relationship. While this provides a challenging context for the work of integration, it contributes to the achievement of differentiation, which is also essential to the progress of collaboration.
This recognition of the significance of context, and of the relationship between context and practice, points towards the value of empirical research in the field of inter-organisational collaboration which surfaces, rather than eliding or obscuring, key aspects of context.

In summary, the adoption of a participant, voluntary sector perspective on cross-sector collaboration builds on current IOR theory and concepts by moving attention away from collaboration as an entity (a partnership, working group, or specific network), and from leadership of that entity. Instead, it points towards leadership practice which ‘makes things happen’ by both responding to and seeking to impact on context in terms of the continually shifting collaborative environment. This research argues that participants looking to enact leadership in this way will practice both collaboratively and disruptively, frequently building on interpersonal relationships, driven by a sense of sector identity, to embed themselves, their organisation and their cause into the local manifestation of the ‘collaborative fabric’.

9.3 Contri buti on of the research

This study makes five key contributions to collaboration theory. These are listed briefly below, then explored in further detail:

1. presenting a voluntary sector participant perspective on cross-sector collaboration, describing the leadership practice of these participants in a context of asymmetric cross-sector collaborative relationships shaped by the four key factors of policy, processes, relationships, and participant identity;
2. introducing a concept of ‘collaborative disruption’ to describe participant tactics;

3. highlighting the wider collaborative environment, described as ‘collaborative fabric’, exploring the relationship between that environment and leadership practice, and consequently affirming the significance of context for collaborative practice;

4. contributing to the discussion of ‘tensions’ in IOR research, and proposing that a power tension is inherent in inter-organisational collaboration;

5. establishing the value of detailed policy analysis to the research of collaborative practice.

The research builds then on the recognition in the IOR literature that all collaboration participants may enact leadership, by evidencing how voluntary sector leaders make a difference in collaborative contexts. This practice is recognisable as leadership without or beyond authority (Heifetz, 1994), where participants seek to influence dominant public partners with greater resources and the authority of the state. The thesis argues that participant identity is significant to this practice, and highlights how individuals actively create links between the four elements of relationships, processes, policy, and participant identity to influence formally authorised partners, and make things happen over the longer term. These four factors shape the spaces of asymmetric cross-sector collaboration. Collaboration participants find ways to engage with these factors through everyday practice – and significantly through discourse. This affirms the significance of the activities of sensemaking and framing for leadership in collaboration contexts (Agranoff and McGuire 2001). It also gives some insight into how participants without formal authority contribute to that framing in the context of collaborative relationships which extend beyond the current spaces of collaboration.
Secondly, the research introduces the concept of ‘collaborative disruption’ to describe the tactics of voluntary sector collaboration participants. ‘Collaborative disruption’ captures behaviours through which participants challenge, slow down, and at times halt policy implementation and practices in the context of public sector-led collaboration. It emphasises that, although research participants assert that they want to lead in a manner which is facilitative and enabling, they will use disruptive tactics, in order to draw attention towards the mission, values and purpose of their own organisation, and of the wider sector. This contribution to collaboration theory draws a contrast between the leadership activities of partnership managers, and those of participants. While the former enact tactics of ‘collaborative thuggery’ (Vangen and Huxham 2003), in order to integrate the competing perspectives of partners to the collaboration, the latter enact behaviours which disrupt and differentiate. This contributes to the understanding of the need for both integration and differentiation in collaborative contexts (Ospina and Saz-Carranza, 2010).

Thirdly, through the concept of ‘collaborative fabric’, the research draws attention away from specific collaborative entities, and towards the wider collaborative environment, and the significance of that wider environment for collaborative practice. Taking a longer-term approach to the practice of collaboration, and assessing practice in the light of the wider collaborative environment, provides a more positive context for thinking about voluntary sector engagement in collaboration than a focus on specific short-term collaborative entities or projects. Although they initially appear powerless in this context, voluntary sector collaboration participants enact leadership which responds to the collaborative fabric, but also contributes to its shape and resilience through micro practices and discourse. This perspective contributes to the understanding of the relationship between leadership practice and context.
in collaboration, affirming the significance of context for collaborative practice (see section 9.2 above). It highlights the constraints which context places on practice, but also the potential for practice to impact on context at a locality level, where national policies are translated and implemented. Specifically, the research affirms the centrality of interpersonal relationships to this practice.

The fourth contribution to collaboration theory appears in the discussion of experienced and underlying tensions (Chapter 7). The tensions experienced by participant leaders are described here, mirroring, but distinct from those experienced by partnership managers, and reflecting an underlying power tension. This concept of an inherent power tension contrasts with previous assertions in the literature (Crosby and Bryson, 2005, Gray, 1985, Gray, 1989, Hardy and Phillips, 1998b) that inter-organisational collaboration requires a balance of power between participants.

Finally, this research highlights the value of approaching the study of collaboration in specific contexts – in this case voluntary and public sector collaboration in children’s services – through the lens of detailed policy analysis. The aim of policy analysis in this research is not to display its weaknesses in relation to clear proposals for cross-sector collaboration, but rather to suggest how the policy language of ‘partnership’ and ‘coordination’ provides a loose framework for cross-sector collaboration, and not detailed guidance. While this is a challenge for public sector and voluntary sector translators of government policy, it also leaves space for leaders in collaborative contexts to make sense and develop meaning at the local level. I argue here that this meaning making is an important element of leadership in collaborative contexts.
This contributes to collaboration theory by highlighting the significance of policy analysis for understanding specific contexts for collaboration to tackle complex cross-cutting social issues.

However, in describing where the research contributes to collaboration theory, I am also aware of its limitations, which I highlight below.

9.4 Limitations

Perhaps inevitably, this study meets its aims in part – aims to produce thick description, but also to build theory as ‘handles’ for reflective practice (Huxham and Beech 2003). In pursuit of the first of these aims, the research explores what voluntary sector leaders do, and how they contribute to ‘making things happen’. It shows the impact of policy on collaborative practice, as governments introduce, reconfigure, and replace specific collaborative entities, frequently using language which is unclear and ambiguous. The thick description of the work of collaborating from a voluntary sector perspective gradually emerges from the different elements of the study, drawing on policy, interviews and observations, and an account of the wider context. This account reveals the disruption in children’s services caused by a change of government and financial crisis, and the impact of those factors on voluntary sector organisations. However, as highlighted in Chapter 4, a number of factors have limited the achievement of thick description. Specifically, issues of access and of confidentiality impacted on the detail of the description in the thesis. Further opportunities for observation would have been particularly valuable, both to add to the detail of the description, but also in order to
explore further the relationship between participants’ discourse in interviews and observable practice.

In addition, there is a tension in the study between the attempt to achieve a description of situated practice and conceptualisation for theory building. As suggested earlier in the thesis, this is a tension which is inherent to studies which seek to generalise from situated accounts (see section 4.2.6). However, this is not to suggest that the concepts described in Chapter 7 are applicable only to the specific context of the study. Instead, key concepts emerge from the research which might be used to explore the collaboration of not for profit organisations and public agencies in very different circumstances, including adult services, and non-UK contexts, in order to explore their potential application in a variety of contexts. In Appendix 4, I offer a brief account of a scoping study of collaboration between not for profit organisations and public agencies in a developing country in Southeast Asia, framing this account through key concepts from the research, including the importance of interpersonal relationships for building capacity for further collaboration, the impact of organisational interdependency, and the concept of collaborative disruption. This brief study suggests that approaching further research through these concepts may provide insight into contexts beyond that explored in the current research.

In Chapter 7 I began to explore how practitioners might use key concepts from the study to analyse specific collaborative spaces and the wider collaborative environment, as ‘handles’ for reflective practice. However, while the methodology of the study produced the rich detail of thick description, it did not provide opportunity for the level of two-way interaction with practitioners needed to test and refine initial concepts in order to develop user-ready tools for
practice. While this is, to an extent, recognition of the nature of an ethnographically informed research project, it also points to the potential for future research in collaboration with practitioners.

9.5 Future research

The above discussion points then towards potentially fruitful areas for further research – research with practitioners to develop tools for reflective practice from the concepts presented here, and research which explores the generalisability of these concepts to asymmetric collaborations beyond children’s services and beyond the UK context. An action research approach would enable two way interaction with practitioners, and the application and development of key concepts in a context relevant to those practitioners. I suggest this action research would explore key aspects of the research as follows:

- The potential application of the four factors framework (policy, processes, participant identity, and relationships) as a diagnostic tool, as suggested in the previous chapter.
- The concept of ‘collaborative disruption’, and of practitioners’ use of tactics, which are both ‘collaborative’ and ‘disruptive’, in order to influence dominant collaboration partners.
- The concept of ‘collaborative fabric’ as a descriptor of the local environment for collaboration, beyond specific collaborative spaces, which brings a longer-term perspective to cross-sector collaborative relationships.
- The concept of ‘participant identity’, and its relevance to voluntary sector collaboration beyond children’s services in the UK, and in contexts beyond the UK where a distinctive ‘voluntary sector’ is less easily identifiable.
- The significance of interpersonal relationships for building capacity for future collaboration, and the links between these relationships and the wider collaborative environment.

These initial reflections indicate the potential for future research which builds on the concepts generated through this study.

9.6 Key issues for voluntary sector leaders

This final section of the conclusion reflects on issues of practice for leaders of voluntary and community organisations which arise from the study. This research raises difficult questions for the leaders of voluntary organisations who are looking to influence, and deliver services together with public agencies. It surfaces the difficulties and complexities of collaborating across the sector boundary, highlighting the demands, frustrations, and frequent sense that little is achieved. The research also suggests an ambivalence towards the voluntary sector on the part of governments in the account of the wider policy environment, but also the specifics of policy texts. At times, governments appear to attempt to re-position the sector – for example as a gap-filling resource when public agencies fail or are over-stretched, or as a mechanism by which public agencies can access the community. While this provides
opportunities for sector organisations and their leaders, it also poses key questions about the independence of the sector, and its identity.

This study suggests that VCO leaders would be wise to think that they can neither ignore nor resolve such questions. Instead, they live with competing demands, impacted by continually changing policy narratives, and experiencing the consequences of tensions which are inherent in inter-organisational relationships. They must manage these alongside their continuing aim of trying to make things happen in collaborative contexts, in line with the mission and purpose of their value based organisations. Describing this complexity does not reduce the challenges which these leaders encounter, but it does convey the sense that these challenges are to be expected, and lived with. There is further work to do to ensure these leaders are supported and enabled to face these challenges.

Many may wonder at the motivation to stay engaged in collaboration in such challenging and complex circumstances. Indeed, some researchers have advised, ‘Don’t do it unless you have to!’ (Huxham and Vangen, 2005, p.37). However, the question of motivation returns the discussion of cross-sector collaboration to the complex social issues which it seeks to address – and, in the context of this study, to the needs of our children.
Epilogue

It is impossible for me to end this study without returning to the needs of children.

Recent research conducted on behalf of three of the UK’s largest children’s voluntary organisations (Reed, 2012) has predicted a 17% increase in the number of children living in vulnerable families between 2008 and 2015. This is in spite of the raft of policy initiatives to support children and families which have emerged from the Labour and Coalition governments since 1997, and the commitment of both governments to end child poverty by 2020, as required by the Child Poverty Act 2010. A statement which appears on the Department for Education website, accessed in summer 2013, continues to maintain that achieving this goal is a task for cross-sector collaboration:

‘Ending child poverty requires action from central and local government working in partnership with voluntary and community services as well as the private sector, to make a difference to the lives of disadvantaged families.’ (Department for Education, 2011b)

New ‘Working Together’ guidance issued by the Department in April 2013 reinforces the point that keeping children safe is the responsibility of everyone, including workers from voluntary and community organisations, as well as those from public agencies (Department for Education 2013). Yet, in spite of the efforts of so many, the NSPCC estimates that one in five children experiences serious abuse, and more than one child dies each week as a result of maltreatment (Harker et al., 2013). It seems then that appetite for a cross-sector collaborative
approach to the complex and difficult challenges facing children remains in government circles. It also appears, though, that these problems are not diminishing in society. What then is the future for cross-sector collaboration in children’s services, and specifically what is the role for the voluntary sector in that collaboration?

As I finish writing this thesis (August 2013), Compact Voice (representing the voluntary sector) and the government’s Office for Civil Society have just published a new Joint Action Plan (Compact Voice and Office for Civil Society, 2013). This plan makes it clear that there is still much work to be done to ensure that the principles of Compact introduced by Labour and reinterpreted by the Coalition government become enshrined in regular practice. The voice of the sector is all too often an unheard whisper.

In a recent reflection on the issue of child poverty, The Children’s Society, one of the UK’s larger VCOs focused on children’s issues, asks of itself and of wider civil society ‘...how we redeem the language of the public debate on child poverty’ (Ritchie, 2013, p.48). The report suggests that voluntary organisations, together with the individuals, faith groups, and communities of civil society, have a key role to play in this change of language, and can hold government to account, not so much for the achievement of statistical targets, but rather for ‘delivering a vision of human flourishing’ (ibid p.48).

Voluntary and community organisations provide a range of services for children and families in the UK, many of them innovative, accessible, and highly valued, but they must also raise their voices – change the language, reinterpret the issues, re-direct attention, and tell stories of hope and possibilities to re-frame the future for our children.
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## Appendix 1: Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Big Society</strong></td>
<td>Coalition government policy to encourage communities, voluntary organisations, and individuals to work together for social purposes, rather than relying on state provision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaboration</strong></td>
<td>Purposive work which extends across organisational boundaries.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Collaborative conversation</strong></td>
<td>Discursive strategies and practices which facilitate collaboration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaborative disruption</strong></td>
<td>The adoption of tactics which challenge, disrupt and halt the dominant partner, within the context of continuing inter-organisational collaboration.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Collaborative fabric</strong></td>
<td>The wider collaborative environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaborative spaces</strong></td>
<td>Examples of collaboration, whether formal or informal, including partnership boards, working groups, and informal interpersonal relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Infrastructure Organisation</strong></td>
<td>A voluntary organisation whose primary purpose is to support other voluntary organisations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership</strong></td>
<td>The work of individuals to ‘make things happen’, re-direct attention, and change priorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partnership</strong></td>
<td>The term commonly used in practice and policy to describe inter-organisational collaboration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Third Sector</strong></td>
<td>The term adopted during the period of the Labour government to refer to the voluntary sector – with the addition of the organisations adopting the hybrid form of social enterprise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Voluntary Sector</strong></td>
<td>Not for profit, non-governmental organisations, including registered charities and local community groups, focused on social purposes and social change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Voluntary and Community Organisation (VCO)</strong></td>
<td>An organisation from within the voluntary sector – may be a large national charity, or a small community group.</td>
</tr>
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Appendix 2:

Interview Schedule:

Guide for semi-structured Interviews

1. Organisation and job role.
   • Form, purpose and mission of organisation.
   • Current job role and responsibilities.
   • Experience prior to this role, and journey to this point.

2. Engagement with partnerships with public sector agencies, formal and informal:
   • Description and structure of partnerships
   • Aspects specific to children’s services (ie. Children’s Trust arrangements)
   • Note temporality - changes over time
   • Interviewee’s own role in partnership(s)
   • Role in organisation compared with role in partnership
3. **Direction setting and decision-making in partnerships**
   - Partnership processes, specifically decision-making and agenda-setting
   - Ability of and space for partners to set direction and impact on decisions
   - Narrative examples how the interviewee and his/her organisation has been able to change the direction of travel or impact on the agenda, or decision-making.

4. **Achievement of organisational aims and unexpected outcomes through partnership working.**
   - Tensions between partnership/organisation and role in each.
   - Ways in which interviewee manages any tensions if perceived as present.

5. **Interviewee’s concept of his/her role as leadership in this partnership context.**
   - Do you think of yourself as a leader in the partnership context?
   - What does this mean to you?
   - Anything else re leadership in context of third/public sector leadership.
Appendix 3: Ethics Forms

Consent Form

Title of Project: Collaboration for children: leadership in a complex space

This form indicates your consent to participate in the above project.

Please indicate your willingness to take part in this research project by ticking the appropriate box and completing the details below. At any time during the research you will be free to withdraw. In the unlikely event that you should feel unhappy about anything you said and would like me to remove it from the records, you can contact me on the email below and I will remove all or part of your words at any point up until the initial report has been completed.

☐ I am willing to take part in this research, and I give my permission for the data collected to be used in an anonymous format in any written reports, presentations and inclusion in published papers relating to this study.

Name:........................................................................................................................................
(please print)

Signed: ..........................................................................................................................

Date:..............................................................................................................................

Thank you for your participation.

Carol Jarvis, Open University Business School,
Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA
c.jarvis@open.ac.uk
Research Title: Collaboration for children: Leadership in a complex space

I am a research student at the Open University, working towards a PhD, and conducting research into partnership working between the public sector and voluntary and community organisations in children’s services. As well as analysing policy documents, I am interested in talking with individuals who are working or have worked in third sector organisations, in order to understand their experience of partnership working, and I am approaching you as you have considerable experience in this area.

Interviews will be informal and will last up to an hour. They may be audio-recorded to ensure that all of the contribution is accurately captured, although if you prefer written notes can be taken instead and you would be welcome to have a look at these to ensure that they accurately reflect your views. Extracts from your interview may be included in reports to be submitted by me for examination at the Open University and may also at a later date be used in papers for publication. However, your responses will be confidential, included alongside that of other individuals’ participating in this research and any such extracts would be carefully anonymised. This research will follow the Open University research ethical guidelines.

Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the research at any time. In the unlikely event that you should feel unhappy about anything you said and would like me to remove it from the records, you can contact me on the email below and I will remove all or part of your words. This can be done at any point up until the initial report has been completed.

Thank you for your time and assistance, and I do hope you find this research interesting.

Carol Jarvis, Open University Business School, Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA
c.jarvis@open.ac.uk

If you wish to talk to a third party about this research, you can contact my research supervisor Siv Vangen at the above address or s.vangen@open.ac.uk
Appendix 4: Scoping study

Here I offer initial thoughts based on a brief scoping study visit made during the period of the research to a group of small non profit organisations working with children and young people in a developing nation in Southeast Asia. In addition to site visits and informal interviews with their leaders, I conducted semi-structured interviews with two senior government officers. The following pointers for further study draw on issues highlighted in the UK research of the thesis:

- **Organisational interdependency**
  The dependencies between non profits and public agencies were significantly different from those encountered in UK based research. Whereas in the UK, VCOs faced difficulties related to their dependency on the resources of public agencies, and were threatened by public sector funding cuts, in the Southeast Asian nation, this dependency was reversed. Senior government officers indicated their inability to implement social changes without the resources of finance and expertise of international institutions, mediated via non profits.

- **Weaving from interpersonal relationships**
  Interpersonal relationships, between leaders within and across sectors, facilitated further engagement in collaboration. Relationships between leaders from non profits appeared to be a source of resilience, and a safe space in which risk could be managed. Dyadic relationships across the sector divide had been established over time, based on evidence of successful project delivery, but also of willingness to speak out on behalf of vulnerable sections of the community. Formal collaboration processes were largely undeveloped in this country, but this
scoping study suggested that working relationships might be a source of emergent processes. In the meantime, in the absence of public sector resources and collaboration processes, individual leaders appeared to depend heavily on their personal resources, including their expertise, but also their personal commitment to undertake work for children in a context with little infrastructure, and uncertain financial reward.

- **Participant identity**

Although there is an abundance of non profit organisations in this country, there is little sense of a ‘sector’ of such organisations. However, a sense of shared identity appeared strong amongst the small number of non profit leaders encountered in the scoping study, as they allied themselves with a strong narrative of social change, and with other social change actors.

- **Collaborative disrupters**

Leaders from non profits presented themselves as disrupters of current policies and practices, but also as partners with public agencies. Their disruption was expressed in oral and written form as alternative narratives of the needs of children and alternative services to meet those needs. For example, residential care for children is very common, but is rejected by non profit leaders as an appropriate response to the needs of children. Despite this rejection of common practice, collaborative partnership continues, possibly because key individuals in public agencies are convinced of the alternative interpretation of children’s needs, but also because of the dependency of those agencies on the resources, human and financial, of non profits.

This brief scoping study provided starting points from which further research might be developed.