

State of Cross-Sector Collaboration in the UK: The Leaders' Views 2025

Insights from leaders across sectors on what works, what holds collaboration back, and what needs to change



State of cross-sector collaboration

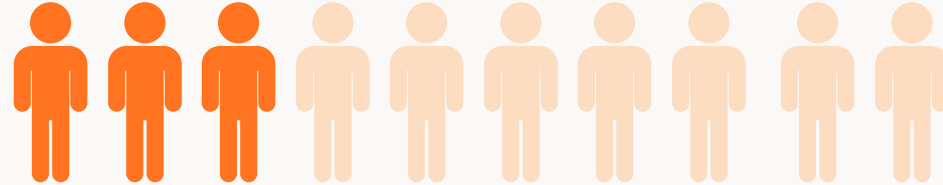
Our 2025 survey data reveals a cross-sector collaboration landscape in transition. Communication, understanding of growth opportunities, and perceived impact have all improved modestly, suggesting that cross-sector partnerships are slowly shifting from aspiration to action. However, regulatory confidence has weakened, and delivery continues to trail belief. The conviction that collaboration drives economic growth remains virtually universal, but execution and coordination remain the primary challenge. While progress is emerging, structural constraints and uneven delivery continue to hold collaboration back.



The need remains

92 %

believe that cross-sector collaboration can support economic growth and positive policy outcomes, a sentiment unchanged from 2024. Across all sectors, leaders continue to see collaboration as essential to the UK's long-term prosperity.



But the gap between the need and delivery persists.

12 %

of respondents rate current cross-sector collaboration as 'Good' or 'Excellent', showing execution remains limited despite enduring conviction.

While belief in collaboration remains near-universal, **less than 3 in 10** leaders see it translating into tangible economic growth outcomes, a modest rise from **26%** in 2024.

Where progress is being made



Perception of communication between sectors has improved modestly, rising from **7%** in 2024 to **12%** in 2025, suggesting early signs of progress in transparency and coordination.



Understanding of challenges and growth opportunities has improved, rising from **24%** in 2024 to **29%** in 2025, a signal that engagement and empathy across sectors are deepening.

Where concerns remains



Belief in a supportive regulatory environment has softened, declining from **30%** in 2024 to **25%** in 2025. While government efforts signal a commitment to change, leaders continue to question how effectively regulation is adapting to evolving cross-sector priorities.

The cross-sector collaboration gap

In 2025, fewer than 1 in 4 leaders agree that “sectors collaborate effectively to support economic growth”. The underlying challenges are significant: only a quarter of leaders across all sector feel the Civil Service fully understands the challenges other sectors face, while communication and dialogue presents an even greater gap: just 12–14% of public and private sector leaders consider cross-sector dialogue sufficient, with non-profit and education leaders reporting slightly higher levels at 21–25%, though still indicating substantial room for improvement.

Leaders who “agree” or “strongly agree” with the following statements:

Statement	Public sector	Private sector	NFP sector	Edu sector
“Sectors collaborate effectively to foster economic growth.”	25%	19%	29%	25%
“Communication and dialogue between the sectors is sufficient.”	14%	12%	21%	25%
“The Civil Service understands the challenges the other sector is facing.”	23%	22%	29%	25%

Fig: Cross-sector collaboration remains weak despite improvement from last year: fewer than one in four leaders see communication and understanding between sectors as sufficient.

Why this matters

Belief in cross-sector collaboration has improved modestly since last year. Yet the gap between belief and delivery remains; only one-fourth of leaders across sectors see collaboration translating into tangible outcomes. The encouraging gains in communication and understanding of challenges and growth opportunities over the year demonstrate that progress is possible when leaders invest in the right foundations. The priority now should be to build on this momentum by strengthening capabilities, governance structures, and sustained dialogue, while addressing the regulatory friction, resource constraints, and coordination gaps that continue to slow progress along these areas.



Key considerations for leaders



Bridge the belief–delivery gap: Convert conviction into capability by ensuring investment into collaborative leadership skills and sustained joint delivery mechanisms.



Rebuild trust in regulators: Enable them to act as facilitators through co-designed frameworks and early stakeholder engagement.



Double down on communication and continuity: Embed regular, structured dialogue to maintain alignment.



Sustain optimism: The modest improvements are encouraging, but only lasting investment in skills, networks and shared delivery will ensure continued progress.

Where collaboration is making the most impact

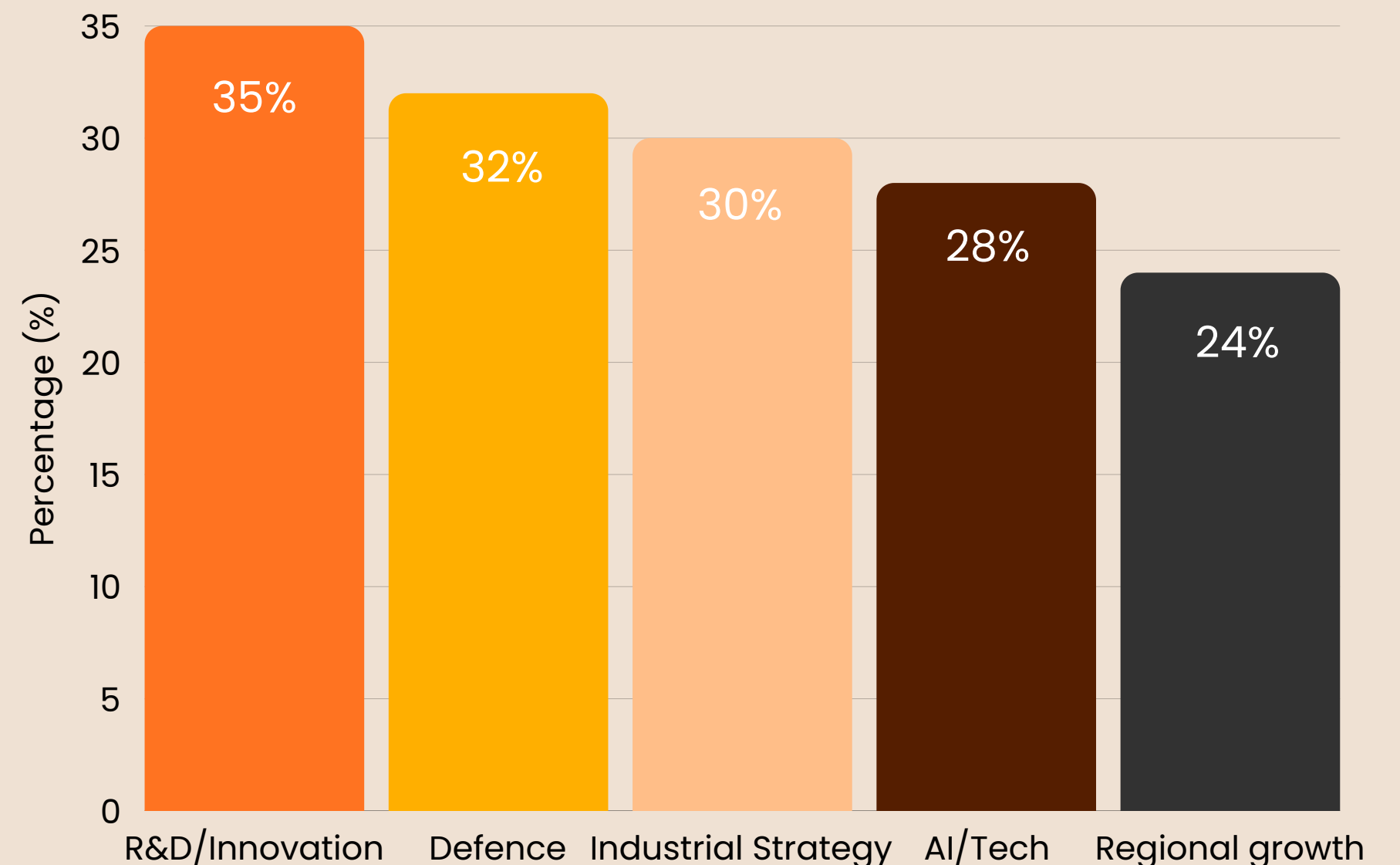
Cross-sector collaboration in 2025 is evolving, moving from ad-hoc coordination to purposeful, capability-driven partnership. Compared with 2024, where collaboration delivers the greatest value has shifted markedly. Leaders now see effectiveness most strongly in areas that combine strategic importance, visible outcomes, and proven frameworks for joint delivery.

How views have evolved

Leaders' confidence in collaboration has become more focused. Rather than spreading evenly across policy domains, it now clusters around areas where collaboration is beginning to show results and sustained alignment across sectors. Four themes dominate: **R&D and innovation, defence, industrial strategy, AI and future technology** and **regional and place-based growth**. Together, they represent an evolving perception that blends innovation, national security, and long-term, inclusive economic growth.

Where collaboration is working best

R&D and innovation, defence, and industrial strategy continue to stand out as the strongest areas of perceived effectiveness, with AI and future technology rapidly emerging as new priorities. Confidence in these sectors reflects growing confidence in science, innovation, and technology as key drivers of collaboration, while regional and place-based growth remain a resilient area for a joined-up approach.



Confidence has declined in areas once viewed as strongest

Economic security, supply chains, and trade



Perceived effectiveness of collaboration in this area has fallen from 23% in 2024 to 9.4% in 2025 as leaders feel the impact of escalating geopolitical tensions, trade imbalances, and heightened economic uncertainty across the globe.

-14%

Long-term infrastructure growth



This domain has also experienced a significant decline compared to last year (29% to 17%), reflecting challenges around budget constraints, project timelines, and funding certainty.

-12%

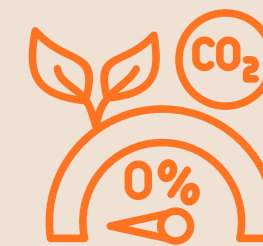
Skills Development



The decline in skills domain, based on our qualitative responses, point to misalignment between training programmes and industry needs, limited resources for cross-sector coordination, and differing expectations between educators and employers.

-6%

Net-zero



This remains a priority area but faces competing fiscal pressures, and the need for clearer, more consistent policy frameworks to maintain momentum and confidence in long-term decarbonization efforts.

-6%

Real-world examples of collaboration delivering economic growth

We asked leaders for real-world examples where they believe cross-sector collaboration has delivered economic impact. Some of their responses reveal a mix of practical successes alongside reflections, from regional regeneration to social value procurement.

Public sector

Greater Manchester Regeneration -

"Greater Manchester's collaboration with business and universities to regenerate the region...using heritage but deploying innovation...is delivering real economic momentum."

Non-profit sector

Social Value Procurement

Models - *"Social value consortia embedding local suppliers and voluntary groups into contracts are reshaping local economies."*



Private sector

Elizabeth Line (London) -

"The Elizabeth Line proves what long-term collaboration can achieve... it continues to deliver major economic benefits despite early challenges."

Education sector

University-SME Productivity

Partnerships - *"University partnerships with local SMEs have boosted productivity and graduate employment."*

Why this matters

These shifts indicate that effectiveness is increasingly defined by proven delivery and measurable outcomes. Leaders trust collaboration most where governance is clear, partnerships are embedded, and outcomes are visible, as seen in defence, innovation, and industrial strategy. In contrast, areas requiring longer-term coordination and stable policy frameworks continue to test confidence.

This evolution signals a more realistic and performance-driven approach: collaboration is judged not by ambition alone, but by the ability to deliver sustained, measurable impact. The opportunity ahead is to extend this change beyond a few well-developed domains, building on what works while strengthening the foundations that enable all collaboration to succeed.



Key considerations for leaders



Build on evolving models: Learn from R&D, defence, and industrial strategy to strengthen collaboration in other sectors.



Support emerging frontiers: Strengthen AI, social value, and regional growth with clear governance and shared incentives.



Address delivery gaps: Rebuild confidence in infrastructure, skills, and investment through continuity and sustained coordination.



Focus on measurable impact: Use shared metrics and transparency to demonstrate progress and maintain trust.



Anchor progress in performance: Deliver visible results that sustain momentum and build confidence across all sectors.



What enables effective collaboration, and what gets in the way

Belief remains strong, but the foundations require strengthening.

The 2025 survey shows that while belief in the importance of collaboration remains near-universal, its foundations are weakening. Progress in leadership and communication has stalled, and trust, the most cited enabler in 2024, has fallen significantly. This signals an evolving but challenging landscape: collaboration is valued, but leaders and organisations are not yet fully equipped to deliver consistently.

What makes collaboration work

Leaders continue to see shared goals (71%), strong leadership (61%) and belief in trust and mutual respect (59%) as the most important enablers of effective collaboration. However, belief in each has fallen year-on-year, suggesting shifting perspectives on what matters most as collaboration moves from aspiration to delivery.

Belief in trust and mutual respect, one of the strongest enablers in 2024, has seen the most decline, falling from 75.3% to 58.6%. This shift in belief reflects the growing challenge of maintaining confidence as UK leaders navigate the transition from dialogue to tangible delivery. **Belief in the importance of a supportive regulatory environment has dropped by 11%,** reflecting concerns that regulatory frameworks alone cannot drive collaboration without changes to procurement and risk-sharing practices.

In their own words

We asked respondents to describe what enables effective collaboration between sectors. A consistent message emerged across public, private, education and non-profit leaders. Collaboration works best when grounded in shared purpose, aligned incentives, regular engagement and mutual respect, moving beyond dialogue to joint problem-solving and delivery.

Public Sector	Private Sector	Education Sector	Non-Profit Sector
"Shared goals & mission clarity"	"Aligned incentives & long-term value"	"Mutual understanding of different incentives"	"Clear public strategies & realistic funding"
"Working-level engagement & co-design"	"Joint problem-solving, not just dialogue"	"Regular forums for policy & research exchange"	"Secondments & relationship-building"
"Political will & leadership backing"	"Value over lowest price in procurement"	"Career mobility across sectors"	"Respect & mutual dependency"

What holds collaboration back

The top barrier **remains misaligned priorities (59%), followed by bureaucracy and slow processes (52%)**; both falling slightly but still dominant.

New pressures are emerging around **resources and funding constraints, which is up by 3%** and **lack of trust between sectors, which is up by 6%**, echoing the drop seen on the enabler side.

Leaders also point to skills shortages and short-termism as persistent structural constraints that hinder continuity and momentum.

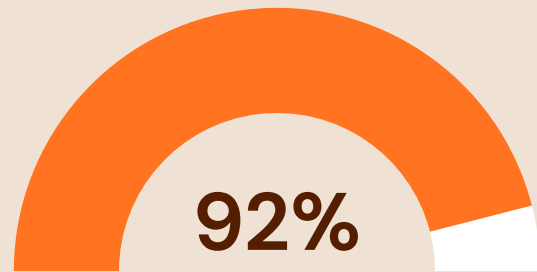


In their own words

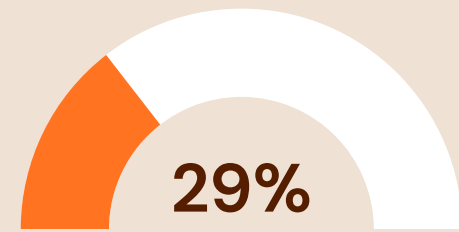
Across public, private, education and non-profit leaders, the barriers most frequently cited were cultural, not just structural. Collaboration is challenged where trust needs building, incentives are misaligned, systems lack flexibility, and engagement remains at dialogue rather than moving to shared accountability.

Public Sector	Private Sector	Education Sector	Non-Profit Sector
"Bureaucracy and clearance hurdles"	"Deep-seated mistrust and political rhetoric"	"Misaligned timelines and incentives"	"Lack of clarity and strategic direction from government"
"Policy churn and short-term focus"	"Value vs lowest-cost procurement culture"	"Limited resources for partnership work"	"Power imbalance and funding insecurity"
"Limited commercial awareness in government"	"No shared accountability for outcomes"	"Few pathways for collaboration or secondments"	"Control without co-design or mutual risk-sharing"

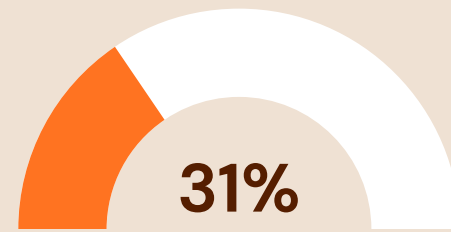
Are leaders fully equipped?



of leaders believe collaboration drives growth



of leaders feel they understand how to collaborate meaningfully

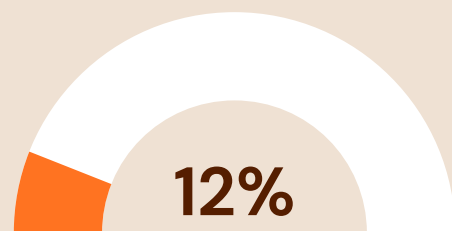


of leaders have received formal training.

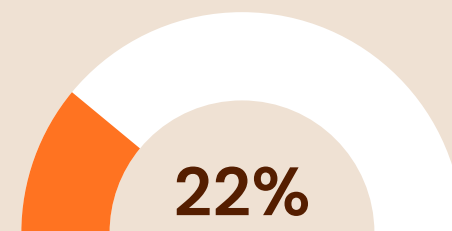
16% ↓

since 2024

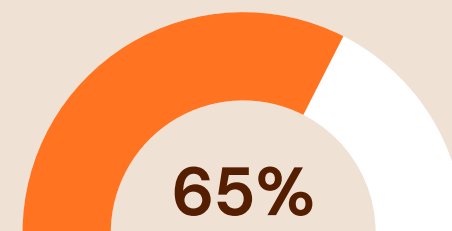
Organisational support remains uneven



Offer structured development programmes



Support secondment across sectors



Strong cross-sector networks of leaders outside the organisation*

12% ↓

*Cross-sector network of leaders outside organisations are also shrinking since 2024, suggesting the need for more avenues of regular, sustained engagement.

Why this matters

While the foundations of collaboration face pressure, with trust declining and networks shrinking, the good news is that leaders know what works: shared goals, strong leadership, trust, and clear communication. The challenge is making these sustainable as collaboration becomes more complex and ambitious. This is an opportunity to invest deliberately in the leadership capabilities that underpin effective partnership: structured training, cross-sector secondments, streamlined processes, and regulatory frameworks designed to enable rather than constrain. Building collaboration as a core organisational capability will help leaders move from aspiration to consistent, confident delivery.



Key considerations for leaders



Rebuild trust and alignment: Prioritise shared goals and mutual understanding across sectors.



Invest in capability: Embed collaboration skills through structured training and leadership programmes.



Streamline processes: Simplify governance and reduce bureaucracy to enable faster partnerships.



Strengthen continuity: Mitigate short-term policy and funding cycles that undermine long-term collaboration.

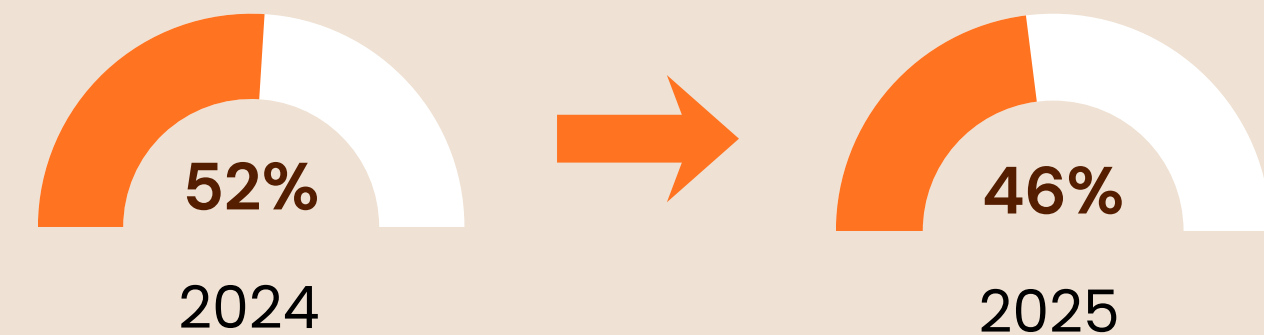


Reinforce connections: Rebuild leader networks and secondment pathways that foster trust and shared learning.

The outlook for cross-sector collaboration

Optimism remains, with clear opportunities to build momentum

Overall optimism about the future of cross-sector collaboration has softened from 2024 to 2025.



Confidence remains high in principle, but leaders are increasingly aware of the delivery challenges that stand between belief and sustained impact.

Where optimism is holding

Non-profit leaders remain the most positive, with **64%** optimistic about future collaboration – up slightly from last year, showing resilience and purpose-led confidence. Public sector optimism remains broadly stable and is up by **3%**, supported by continued belief in the role of cross-sector collaboration in growth and service delivery. Higher education enters the survey for the first time with **50%** optimism, signalling emerging engagement and potential as a bridge between sectors.

Where confidence has weakened

Private sector optimism has declined sharply, falling from **50%** in 2024 to **37%** in 2025. This drop suggests increasing caution among business leaders, particularly around delivery pace, regulatory alignment and confidence in cross-sector impact.

Why this matters

While overall optimism has softened slightly, the belief in the potential of collaboration remains strong, and sectors such as not-for-profits and higher education continue to demonstrate what's possible when purpose, clarity, and flexibility align. The softening confidence, particularly in the private sector, signals a need for greater consistency, faster delivery, and stronger engagement around shared priorities. The opportunity ahead lies in rebuilding momentum through tangible progress: maintaining clear missions across political cycles, investing in collaborative leadership capabilities, and anchoring partnerships in a long-term purpose.

Key considerations for leaders



Rebuild confidence through continuity: Maintain clear, consistent missions across electoral and organisational cycles.



Re-energise private-public collaboration: Reverse the decline in private-sector optimism through stronger regulatory engagement, faster delivery, and shared accountability.



Leverage confident sectors to lead: Non-profit and education leaders remain optimistic; position them as conveners for innovation, skills, and regional renewal.



Invest in collaborative leadership capabilities: Equip leaders with the skills, networks, and structures to turn dialogue into delivery. Optimism follows competence.



Anchor partnerships in long-term purpose: Align collaboration around long-term national missions (innovation, net zero, and place-based growth) to sustain momentum beyond short-term pressures.

Conclusion

Economic growth, community prosperity and improved living standards are challenges that impact all leaders, regardless of their sector. These issues are interdependent; addressing them requires leaders to work across sectoral boundaries to find the right solutions. From this report, it is clear that leaders understand this; it is not a nice-to-have, but a necessity.

While there has clearly been progress in realising the potential of cross-sector collaboration over the last 12 months, there remains much to do. It will require a gear shift across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors if we want to make a meaningful impact on the delivery of sectoral objectives. What is explicit from these findings is that we need to double down on the skillset, mindset and capabilities for the leaders of today and tomorrow. We need to ensure that cross-sector collaboration isn't a buzzword but a working practice. That will require investment in terms of time and resourcing.

In the context of recent government publications, from the Industrial Strategy to the 10-year plans for infrastructure and health, and the AI roadmap to the Strategic Defence Review, to name just a few, the foundations have been laid to build a lasting partnership across sectors. In the next 12 months, the potential opportunities for delivery through cross-sector collaboration in the UK are tremendous.

With that in mind, WIG will continue to work tirelessly with leaders and their organisations to help deliver the potential that cross-sectoral working can unlock. We will build out our strategic dialogue offer to support more honest conversations, develop trust, and build lasting relationships between leaders. We will continue to provide safe spaces for leaders to convene across sectors to develop the critical leadership capabilities. And we will deliver practical insight - through case studies, leadership champions, and examples from across regions and nations - on what works (and what doesn't) in cross-sector collaboration.

We look forward to working with you on this in the months ahead to ensure that the third edition of this survey shows demonstrable progress across all areas of cross-sector collaboration, thereby advancing economic growth, community prosperity and improved living standards that will create a more prosperous Britain for all.

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Tom Sapsted
Director of Strategy and Programmes
WIG

Where WIG can help

This year's survey reveals both the promises and the challenges of cross-sector collaboration in the UK. While leaders across sectors recognise its importance, they consistently point to some key barriers: strained trust, underdeveloped collaboration skills, and contracting networks. At the same time, positive developments are emerging. Communication is improving, understanding between sectors is deepening, and examples of effective collaboration have been shared. The question now is how to turn this positive momentum into sustained delivery. At WIG, based on the insights from this report, we are ready to play our part in making this happen in three key ways.

Creating trusted spaces for strategic dialogue

Leaders need neutral environments to have transparent dialogue and align priorities. We'll enhance our quarterly CEO-Permanent Secretary dialogues and leadership dinners, trusted spaces where sectors can address misalignment and build relationships around long-term national priorities.



Building collaborative leadership capability

Many leaders lack cross-sector collaboration skills, and formal training has declined. We'll support leaders through our experiential programmes, secondments, and mentoring, while establishing an alumni network to champion role models and pilot new approaches across UK regions.



Connecting leaders to evidence and best practice

As networks contract, leaders need proven examples of what works. Our research and peer learning networks provide access to collaboration models on priorities like innovation, AI, and social value. We'll develop international benchmarking insights to help leaders apply lessons at home.

