Collaboration blueprint

Prepared for the NSW Public Service Commission

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1 Collaboration blueprint

1.1 Introduction to the collaboration blueprint

This collaboration blueprint provides an overview of the elements to consider when deciding on ‘why’, ‘with whom’ and ‘how’ to collaborate. It is based on a review of collaboration literature as well as insights and experience from practitioners in the public, private and not for profit sectors.

This collaboration blueprint consists of:

- A high-level depiction of a collaboration framework - see Figure 1
- Guidance about how to apply the framework - from section 1.2
- A detailed version of the collaboration framework – see Figure 4

This blueprint is a guide. It is designed as a tool to form the basis of discussions within and between potential collaborating organisations. It does not provide ‘yes or no’ answers. Rather, it is intended to guide consideration of the potential or existing collaboration. The blueprint may also trigger new questions to consider specific to different types of collaboration projects.

**High level framework**

The high level framework summarises the main questions to consider for organisations before, during and after collaboration. These ‘tests’ can inform participating organisations’ decisions about proceeding or continuing collaboration.

### Figure 1 High-level collaboration framework

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<td>Which parties share an interest in the purpose of collaboration? Who will bring the resources and capabilities to support success and drive innovation?</td>
<td>Can we achieve the enablers and overcome the barriers to successful collaboration? Do we have the capabilities required to support effective collaboration?</td>
<td>What structure and responsibility arrangements are required? Do we have expertise with this model of collaboration?</td>
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Before | During | After
1.1.2 Before we begin - What is collaboration?

The term ‘collaboration’ is used frequently but clarity over what it actually means is less straightforward. There are two main interpretations – a broad common usage and a narrower definition. The broader meaning of collaboration comes from its common everyday usage, and encompasses a wide range of situations where one party works with another. Collaboration in its broader meaning can be understood as:

More than one party within the public sector or within and beyond the public sector working together in the areas of policy development, service design or service delivery.

Collaboration in its narrower definition can be understood as:

A particular form of working together characterised by mutually developed common purpose, joint authority and control, along with shared resources, risks and benefits.

With this in mind collaboration is best understood as a span of collaboration as shown in Figure 2 below. Collaboration in a broader sense encompasses the whole span, whereas the narrower definition of collaboration is at the right end of the span. The diagram represents that collaborating organisations can be more or less ‘close’ - at the left hand end the organisations are quite distinct, perhaps just consulting each other and sharing information. At the right end the organisations, at least in one area of their operations, have effectively ‘merged.’ They have a common mission, joint authority and control and share risk, resources and benefits.

This blueprint uses the broad definition of collaboration which covers the span of available options for working together.
1.1.3 This tool should be ‘scaled’ to the size of your collaboration

There are many different forms of collaboration, from networking between organisations through to partnership where two or more organisations effectively ‘merge’ into one.

The following are the typical features which define collaboration¹:

- Commonality of mission/purpose
- Compatible authority and control mechanisms
- Formality of relationship
- Trust between collaborators
- Investment in the collaboration
- Risk, benefit and resource sharing
- Communication and information sharing.

Not every form of collaboration will require every element within each blueprint question blueprint to be in place. The blueprint should be ‘scaled’ - the more features of collaboration present and the greater the extent of those features, the more critical the elements of the blueprint become for the collaborating organisations. Collaborating organisations should consider the likely scale and intensity of their intended collaboration in thinking about how necessary, and to what extent, each element should be. Further detail on the elements is presented below.

1.2 Collaboration blueprint guidance

The blueprint guidance follows the high level framework in Figure 1; it steps through each part of the framework and provides simple guidance and prompts for collaborating organisations to consider.

The blueprint is useful for all sectors. There are some special considerations that the public sector must address; in particular public sector organisations must consider the appropriateness of collaborating with private and not for profit organisations on a particular issue. These considerations are discussed under the question ‘Are we able to support the collaboration?’.

Before you enter collaboration

The next sections describe the elements that should be considered prior to entering collaboration.

‘1. Why collaborate?

Objective: to know what you hope to achieve and why collaboration is essential to achieving it

There are situations where collaboration can achieve significant improvements in customer outcomes that can’t be achieved by one organisation acting on its own. This is because collaboration enables organisations to access each other’s complementary knowledge, ideas, skills, status, relationships, assets and funding. This can result in increased innovation, effectiveness, cost effectiveness, and efficiency, reduced risk, and the development of relationships, greater societal trust and societal engagement.

However collaboration can be costly and difficult. Potential collaborating organisations must think about what they are seeking from collaboration - both separately and together. Consider what benefits, direct and indirect, are anticipated. The expected benefits can then be compared to the estimated direct and indirect costs of pursuing collaboration.

To determine whether the purpose is best achieved by collaboration, the party intending to initiate the collaboration needs to consider:

- What social problem / issue is the focus of the intended collaboration, and what do you intend to achieve by collaborating to address that problem / issue?
- Are there other organisations who are motivated to achieve this purpose?
- What aspect of the problem / issue could be addressed or assisted by involvement of those organisations?
- What benefits does collaborating with those organisations deliver over and above working alone to achieve the purpose?
- What are the intended results of collaboration (for example, better, different or new service approaches)?
- How long would it reasonably take before a collaborative approach would realise those results? Is that period longer than working on the problem / issue alone? If so, are there some indirect benefits of the collaboration that will assist future efforts to address that or another social problem / issue?

Milestone check: How would you know if you had satisfied this question?

You are able to describe the purpose of the collaboration in a short statement that communicates the core issue, motivation for action, reason for collaboration and likely results.

If the following test question is satisfied, the parties may proceed to the next question. If not, it will be difficult to rally support from other stakeholders including decision makers and / or other parties to collaboration.

Test 1: Will collaboration achieve different and better results than we would alone?
2. Who should be involved in the collaboration?

Objective: to know who is, or should be, in the collaboration and why

Successful collaboration is delivered through the collective effort of the participating organisations. Collaborators should identify others that can or should be involved in the collaboration, recognising that not all those who are willing will be appropriate and not all those who would be useful will be willing. Research on collaboration highlights the importance of the individual who acts as the ‘convener’ who identifies the purpose, marshals initial support to it, and builds the common purpose by eliciting alignment between the collaborating parties. Organisations also need to be ready and open to being approached by others to form a collaborative venture – you will not always be the ‘leader.’

Part of this process of finding and arranging potential collaborating organisations is thinking about how these organisations will contribute to and come to share a mutual goal, purpose and expected benefit. The following considerations can help organisations answer the main question:

• Who is the right party to lead the collaboration? Determine who is best placed to motivate participation and coordinate the efforts of the various organisations party to the collaboration (through their will or commitment to the purpose, resources, relationships or other factors).

• Which parties are necessary to include in the collaboration to ensure it has or achieves the legitimacy required for success? Who is not necessary to include, but needs to be informed or consulted?

• What does each organisation bring to the collaboration? How might the contribution be of value to the purpose of the collaboration? Who might bring or oppose the innovation being sought through collaboration?

• Ensure that each party you propose including in the collaboration is committed to the overall purpose of the collaboration? If they are they undertaking similar activities themselves, or are not willing to provide resources to support the purpose they may not be suitable collaboration partners.

• Are all organisations willing and able to both recognise and value each other’s contribution?

Milestone check: How would you know if you had satisfied this question?

You have identified the range of appropriate collaborating organisations (or potential – for example, possible partners in a commercial model) and understand what value each will bring.

If the following test question is satisfied, the parties may proceed to the next question. If not, it will be difficult to know whether the organisations involved are the right organisations and whether the necessary combination of capabilities and assets is available to form the collaboration.

Test 2: Are the parties likely to share a mutual goal and bring innovative approaches?
3. Are we able to support the collaboration?

**Objective: to consider the enablers for effective collaboration and whether you can put them in place**

Despite the potential value that can be achieved through collaboration, collaborations often fail. Collaboration literature and experience from practitioners in the public, private and not for profit sectors point to a set of critical enablers and barriers that need to be addressed to increase the likelihood of successful collaboration. As discussed previously; depending on the scale, form, intent and model of collaboration these enablers and barriers will matter to different extents. Each, however, should at least be considered – they are the honest questions collaborating organisations should ask of themselves and each other before and during the collaboration.

** Mutual goals, purpose and benefit is a threshold requirement for collaboration**

Without a mutual understanding of the goals, purpose and benefit the collaboration is intending to achieve, it will go nowhere. Each party to collaboration has their own self-interest that will influence how they relate to the overall purpose of collaboration. They will also have their own organisational priorities which will impact how much they are prepared to commit and expect to benefit. It is essential that these are clearly understood by each of the parties involved. Key questions to consider include:

- Do you know what you require from the collaboration and are you prepared to move your position to find mutual ground with a partner/s?
- Are you ready to explore goals, purpose and benefits with your partner/s?
- Are the collaborating organisations clear on what specific benefits each of the other organisations is seeking, and is there recognition and valuing of what each organisation brings?
- If you are leading the collaboration, are you able to agree mutual goals, purpose and benefits among the parties to the collaboration and rally the parties to support those goals, purpose and benefits?

**Are the enablers of collaboration in place (or can they be)?**

Ensuring your collaboration is supported by the following enablers increases the likelihood of success.
1. Trust

Mutual trust between the parties is perhaps the second most important enabler of collaboration. Without mutual trust it is unlikely that a successful collaboration will develop. For the public sector the ability to build or maintain trust can be more difficult than it is with other sectors. Government policies, strategies and resource commitments can often change for political reasons. While this is understandable, it can lead to ‘mixed messages’ and destabilise relationships. Key questions to consider:

- Is there mutual trust in the capability and commitment of each organisation to deliver their component of the collaboration? This includes trust in the party leading the collaboration to coordinate the activities involved in the collaboration?
- If this trust does not exist – for example, if the organisations have not worked together before – are there mechanisms in place to build this trust? What will it take to overcome past negative experiences that might prevent a strong collaboration being established?
- Are there opportunities to identify, deliver and celebrate small, early wins to demonstrate that the relationship is working and delivering results?
- Building and maintaining trust often requires a sustained effort over a long period. Are the expected benefits of the collaboration worth this effort?

2. Leadership

Successful collaboration requires leadership at various levels. The collaboration venture itself requires leadership to rally support from participants to the mutual goals, purpose and benefits, and to coordinate the efforts of participants during the collaboration. Successful collaboration also requires support from the leadership group within the participating organisations, and from those individuals or groups who undertake certain activities as part of the collaboration. The public sector can experience particular challenges when seeking to commit and maintain continuity of leadership in collaboration. Strict accountability arrangements can disempower individuals in favour of collective leadership mechanisms while organisational restructuring and other forms of movement within the public sector can undermine continuity in key roles. Key questions to consider:

- Do you have a strong, committed leader of your collaboration who has the capability to ‘rally the troops’ and resolve conflicts to ensure the collaboration achieves its intended results?
- Are the mutual goals, purpose and benefit supported by the leadership group within the organisations participating in the collaboration?
- Are the individuals or groups who will deliver certain activities of the collaboration committed to those mutual goals, purpose and benefit, and will those individuals or groups undertake the required activities to achieve those goals, purpose and benefits?

3. Individuals

Individuals make the collaboration. They often initiate the collaboration and, through their passion or drive, maintain the interest or attention of participating organisations on the purpose of the collaboration. As is the case with ‘leadership’, the nature of decision making, restructuring and other personnel movements in the public sector can limit the ongoing involvement of crucial individuals. Key questions to consider:

- What is in place to foster and support influential individuals?
- How will you respond if key individuals to the collaboration leave, either in your organisation or that of a collaborating partner? Do other individuals in the collaboration have the capability and drive to lead the collaboration, or can someone from outside be brought in?
4. Governance

Governance provides a framework for joint action which is a vital aspect of collaboration. The public sector is subject to a complex set of accountabilities which apply to financial obligations, employment protocols, purchasing rules and procedures. Public sector accountability and governance arrangements can limit the flexibility required for collaboration. Key questions to consider:

- Are the parties clear on the governance arrangements – how is the collaboration coordinated, strategy set, risks identified and managed, operations monitored, stakeholders engaged?
- Does the governance arrangement clearly identify the contribution sought from each party?
- Is the process for decision-making documented (i.e. will decision be made by consensus or will one individual have ultimate decision-making power)?
- Is the governance arrangement agreed and supported by all parties to the collaboration?
- Is the governance arrangement flexible and adaptable, given the dynamic nature of collaboration?
- Are governance arrangements within your organisation designed to work against or even prevent collaboration?

Do we have strategies to overcome the likely barriers to successful collaboration?

There are also barriers that will need to be considered and addressed before entering collaboration arrangements. These are:

1. Power

An imbalance of power can undo collaboration, by directly ending it or turning it into something closer to coercion. The public sector brings unique power that is unrivalled by other collaborating parties. The public sector is often also the regulator/rule-maker - it makes or changes the rules other parties are required to follow. The scale of the public sector resources eclipses those of other parties. Unless these power imbalances are addressed, power asymmetries can overwhelm the other parties to collaboration. Key questions to consider:

- Are you aware of your power, and the implications of its use? Is there an imbalance of power?
- If you can achieve the desired outcomes without collaboration, ask yourself again why you are considering a collaboration – and whether you are truly committed (remember that breaking a collaboration will reduce trust, and may limit the chance for future collaboration).
- Do potential partners have alternatives to achieving desired outcomes without collaborating?
- What specific measures can be put in place to re-balance power in joint decision making?

2. Accountability

Accountability concerns can make it difficult to form a collaboration, and particularly hard to maintain. Key questions to consider:

- Do you have internal accountabilities to support your commitments under the collaboration?
- Who has determined the accountability arrangements and have they been mutually agreed?
- Do you know who is to do what, when?
- Are you ready to adapt these accountabilities as the collaboration progresses and parties identify areas for improvement and development?
• Are parties clear how future accountabilities will be identified? Are parties clear how performance in relation to respective accountabilities will be measured and tracked?

3. Investment

Collaborations require investment, be it in time, money or resources. The total investment required from all participating organisations together is invariably greater than the cost would be if one organisation delivered the results themselves. Key questions to consider:

• What resources will be required to bring about and support the collaboration, and who is best placed to provide them? This will include consideration of:
  ◦ What collaboration forums will be used and what logistical support is required?
  ◦ What activities may need to be funded to support the collaboration e.g. research, community consultations?
• Does the collaboration require a coordinator? If not, how will it be supported and driven?
• How long will the collaboration operate and what impact will that have on resources?
• Will the collaboration trial new approaches and what investment would be required to support those approaches?

4. Culture

Organisation cultures and languages need to be understood and bridged. Key questions to consider:

• Does your internal culture permit and promote collaboration?
• Have you audited your own culture and that of your potential collaborators, to identify areas of difference and commonality?
• Can you invest the time upfront to work towards understanding the differences between the cultures of all collaborating organisations, to achieve mutual understanding?

Capabilities

Collaboration requires a specific set of capabilities that include a combination of technical, conceptual and interpersonal abilities. These are shown in the figure below.
These capabilities are useful in other business functions. The more people there are with more of these capabilities, the more successful collaboration is likely to be and the more likely it is that opportunities for collaboration will be identified and pursued in the first place. Key questions to consider:

- Do you and your potential collaborators cover off on these capabilities?
- What is missing? What impact do you think that absence might have?
- What do other collaborating organisations bring and is there a chance to offset each other’s weaknesses without compromising overall contribution to the collaboration?
- What contingency plans do you have in place in the event that some individuals with necessary capabilities for the collaboration leave?

Test 3: Do we have the required capabilities, or have a reasonable plan to address identified deficiencies, to support the collaboration?

4. Which model will be most suitable?

**Objective: to choose the most appropriate model and level of collaboration**

There are a wide range of different models of collaboration. The models overlap one another, rather than being mutually exclusive. It is of course important to choose the right model. Select a model that suits the needs of the collaboration. It may also be necessary to adjust the model during collaboration. Ensure the model is discussed and explicitly agreed between the collaborating parties.

Key questions to consider are:

1. Is the collaboration primarily about:
   - paying to outsource or insource capabilities or assets that other organisations have, or
   - coordinating the interests and activities of one or more organisations for a common objective?

2. How integrated does the collaboration need to be to achieve the purpose?
   The models, and the general level of integration they require, are summarised in the table below. As the collaboration model becomes more integrated, the costs and risk of the collaboration increase. For this reason, collaborating organisations should choose the least integrated model that will allow them to reach their purpose.

3. Do we have the capability and experience required to effectively operate in the model?
   As the collaboration model becomes more integrated, the capability required to operate the model increases. If it is deemed that the participating organisations do not currently have the capability to use the desired collaboration model, consider whether the capability to collaborate that way can be built prior to entering the collaboration. If not, a different model should be chosen.
Milestone check: How would you know if you had satisfied this question?

When choosing a fit for purpose collaboration model, have you considered the following:

- the collaboration’s primary motivation (commercial or coordination),
- the required level of integration and
- the collaborating organisations’ capability and experience with this type of model

Test 4: Is the model fit for purpose and do we have knowledge and experience required for this model?
5. During collaboration - can we sustain our effort?

**Objective: to know what the collaboration might involve and whether we will be able to sustain effort**

Successful collaboration is a sustained effort – it requires ongoing attention to the enablers and barriers in addition to upfront planning. These questions should be asked before and throughout the collaboration. These questions prompt collaborating organisations to be continually reviewing, adapting and refining the collaboration.

The following considerations can help an organisation to critically evaluate its own and others’ ability to sustain effort:

- Do we have a realistic estimate of the time required for the collaboration to succeed?
- Do we have the required short, medium and long term commitment to see this collaboration through?
- Are contingencies in place if the circumstances of the organisations participating in the collaboration or the social problem / issue that is the focus of the collaboration change?
- What will happen if one or more of the enablers are lost, and what will be done about it? For example if the influential individual who sparked the collaboration leaves the collaboration, can the capabilities or drive of that person be transferred to another individual to lead the collaboration?
- What will happen if one or more of the barriers emerge, and what will be done about it? For example, if one party withdraws some resources from the collaboration, for whatever reason, can their investment be covered by the other parties?
- Is the collaboration delivering results? If not, why not?
- Would the intended results of this collaboration be achieved faster and more easily if the collaboration ceased? If yes, what would the impact of ceasing the collaboration be on future potential collaborative ventures?

**Milestone check: How would you know if you had satisfied this question?**

Our organisation and others have engaged in a process to assess our ability to sustain effort over the life of the collaboration, and we have a process for ongoing assessment and adjustment.

These are difficult questions, but they can help to keep the collaboration on track, and to prevent a collaboration from draining both resources and trust – trust which might be required for future, more effective, collaborations.

*Test 5: is the collaboration delivering value to each party?*
6. After a collaboration - reviewing the results of collaboration

**Objective: to know what the collaboration has taught us**

Evaluation is an essential part of good public policy. Reflection, assessment and a commitment to learning are also very important for collaboration among the public, private and not for profit sectors in their efforts to improve customer outcomes for the citizens of NSW. Both the outcomes and process of collaboration need to be evaluated. Each element of the blueprint can operate as a criterion for assessment. For example,

- What value was created by the collaboration?
- How appropriate was our decision to collaborate?
- How accurate were our estimates of cost and benefit?
- Did we choose the right model of collaboration? What did we learn about using this particular model of collaboration?
- Did we assess the enablers and capabilities correctly and did we get them right throughout the collaboration?
- If things went less well than expected, why? If better than expected, why?
- What should future collaborators learn from our experience? What have we learned?
- And, where applicable, how have we celebrated our combined success?

Collaboration is both a process and a way of thinking; both can be learned and improved through repeated practice and reflection. That is what makes this final element of the blueprint so important; while it is the last step in one collaboration, it is the first step towards more effective future collaboration to improve customer outcomes for the citizens of NSW.
1. Why collaborate?

What do we hope to achieve through collaboration?
(insert a short description and select the appropriate boxes)
- Increase innovation
- Increase effectiveness of services
- Increase cost effectiveness of services
- Increase efficiency of service delivery
- Reduce risk
- Increase societal trust
- Increase societal engagement

How will you know if collaboration is successful?
* What are the early signs of success?
* How long should the collaboration take before it is successful?

Test 1: Will collaboration achieve different and better results than we would alone?
Yes [ ] No [ x ]

2. Who should collaborate?

What resources will the collaboration access?
1. Knowledge and ideas
2. Relationships
3. Skills/competencies
4. Assets
5. Status

Who are the right parties to the collaboration?
Collaboration party and resources:
- Intra-departmental
- Inter- departmental
- Not-for-profit
- Private sector
- Place specific community

How will citizens be involved?

How will each of the parties to collaboration view the purpose of collaboration?

Test 2: Are the parties likely to share a mutual goal and bring innovative approaches?
Yes [ ] No [ x ]

3. Do we have what is required to support the collaboration?

Do the parties offer the capabilities?

- Big picture and systems thinking
- Creativity
- Risk tolerance
- Outcomes orientation
- Self-awareness and adaptation
- Recognising expertise within and of other organisations
- Negotiation
- Ability to motivate other organisations

Communication
- Interpersonal
- Intergovernmental

Trust-building
- Understanding of accountability and responsibility arrangements
- Recognising expertise within and of other organisations
- Relationship, project and knowledge management
- Risk analysis
- Designing evaluation frameworks

We [ ] Other [ ]

3a. Do we have what is required, or have a reasonable plan to address identified deficiencies to support the collaboration?
Yes [ ] No [ x ]

3b. Which of the following has been provided?

- Partnership agreements
- Memoranda of understanding
- Memoranda of cooperation
- Other agreements

3c. Do we have the leadership to drive the collaborative effort?

Yes [ ] No [ x ]

3d. Are the other parties able to commit required investment?

Yes [ ] No [ x ]

3e. Do we have what is required to support the collaboration?

Yes [ x ] No [ ]

3f. Do we have what is required to sustain collaboration?

Yes [ x ] No [ ]

4. Which model of collaboration is most appropriate?

Is the collaboration primarily about purchasing the benefits that other organisations may bring or is it primarily about coordinating the interests and activities of many organisations?

Low intensity
- Low intensity
- High intensity

How integrated (intensively shared) does the collaboration need to be to achieve its purpose?

Test 4: Is the model fit for purpose and do we have knowledge and experience required for this model?
Yes [ x ] No [ ]

5. Are we able to sustain collaboration?

How will initial agreement about goals and methods be reached?

How will mission, goals and objectives be reviewed over time?

How will leadership change or be maintained as the collaboration continues?

How will the collaboration membership change to include others?

How will trust be maintained over time?

How will disagreement or conflict be managed?

What early success is required to maintain the interest of parties?

Who is responsible for the resources to support the collaboration planning and communications?

Test 5: Is the collaboration delivering value to each party?
Yes [ x ] No [ ]

6. What has this collaboration taught us?

What is in place to ensure that learning from collaboration is captured and shared?

What benefits were achieved

What problems can it best solve

How effective / cost effective was it

What barriers were encountered

What solutions were tried (which worked and didn’t)

What additional resources were required

What customer value can be created

What is required to maximise success

What lessons are shared

What approaches worked best

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