

APTARA	AUPA	aupa12183	Dispatch: November 30, 2015	CE:
	Journal	MSP No.	No. of pages: 13	PE: Kym Ng

Australian Journal of Public Administration, vol. 00, no. 0, pp. 1–13

doi:10.1111/1467-8500.12183

## RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

# Public Sector Collaboration: Are We Doing It Well and Could We Do It Better?\*

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*Improving collaboration by public sector agencies is an important element of many public sector reforms. Common approaches include introducing responsibilities under legislation and policy decisions, the provision of information and guidance, and strengthening third-party oversight. To identify how collaboration is being practised, this paper reviews evidence from over one hundred reports by Auditors-General and Ombudsmen in Australia and New Zealand to identify key attributes of collaboration, and assesses these further by examining three reports in detail. It concludes that problems that have been known for many years continue to constrain public sector effectiveness. Although continuing existing approaches may assist in improving collaboration, the paper argues that there is a need to adopt more systematic approaches to organisational capacity for collaboration. It further identifies that changes in the external environment such as technology-based innovation may demand rapid progress and change in relation to collaboration.*

**Key words:** *collaboration, working together, coordination, public sector, watchdog, Auditor-General, Ombudsman*

There has been a long-standing public policy focus on joined-up government (Wilkins 2002) with variants described as collaborative government and whole-of-government (O'Flynn et al. 2011). The Auditor-General New South Wales (NSW) observed that successive NSW Governments have been promoting collaboration between departments since the 1990s (2006).

Collaboration has been recognised widely as challenging for public sector managers.

However, encouragement is also often provided, as illustrated in the following comment:

[w]hen agencies work together, with the community, with industry and with other levels of government, it brings benefits and outcomes which are otherwise not possible. Collaboration is worth the effort but it takes ongoing conversation, co-operation and commitment (Queensland Public Sector Commission 2009: 12).

The priority given to collaboration is illustrated by a senior leader in Tasmania introducing a collaboration resource with the opening statement “[w]orking together effectively across Tasmanian Government agencies is a key internal challenge faced by the Tasmanian State Service” (Tasmania Department of Premier and Cabinet 2010).

While there are many definitions of collaboration, this paper uses the term in the broad sense of working together consistent with the observation that “[c]ollaboration means joint

\*The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support received from the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) along with the time and information provided by Australian and New Zealand Auditor-General and Ombudsman institutions. All opinions and any errors in analysis and interpretation rest with the authors. The research is reported in full as an ANZSOG research monograph available from [https://www.anzsog.edu.au/media/upload/publication/156\\_Wilkins-et-al-Working-together-report.pdf](https://www.anzsog.edu.au/media/upload/publication/156_Wilkins-et-al-Working-together-report.pdf).

working or working in conjunction with others. It implies actors—individuals, groups or organisations—cooperating in some endeavour” (Wanna 2008: 3).

Typical approaches to improving collaboration include the introduction of responsibilities under legislation and policy decisions, the provision of information and guidance, and strengthening third-party oversight. These approaches are reviewed in the following paragraphs along with the stimulus provided by new collaborative technologies.

Specifying in legislation cross-government collaboration as one of the roles and responsibilities of agency heads is a form of persuasion. It has been implemented recently for the Commonwealth entities with new legislation encouraging officials of the entity “to cooperate with others to achieve common objectives, where practicable” (*Public Governance, Performance and Accountability Act 2013*). Specific collaborations are often identified through Cabinet decisions particularly where more than one Ministerial portfolio is involved (Wilkins 2011).

There is also an extensive array of sources of practical information and guidance regarding public sector collaboration, normally emanating from central agencies. Generally, such resources encourage public sector agencies to collaborate to increase effectiveness and efficiency. They include collaboration between agencies and with third parties, including not-for-profit and private sector organisations (see for instance Victorian State Services Authority 2007 and Queensland Public Sector Commission 2009). Further, this may also include case studies demonstrating the utility of collaboration (for example, see Nous Group 2013 for eight case studies that are identified as examples of successful collaboration).

A National Collaboration Framework is linked to the Commonwealth legislation encouraging cooperation with others. It was created recently to assist the Commonwealth entities to work collaboratively with state, territory, and local jurisdictions to achieve government objectives. It provides an approach for “entities to follow when seeking to collaborate and

reduces costs, time and risk associated with program or project development and delivery” (Department of Finance 2014).

External oversight and accountability processes provide additional pressures to collaborate. They are also an essential feature of good practice. For instance, Capability Reviews by the Australian Public Service Commission assess, as one of ten elements, the agency’s capacity to “collaborate and build common purpose” which addresses “. . . the agency’s ability to work across government and beyond to address crosscutting issues” (Australian Public Service Commission 2012: 224). Specific collaborations arising from Cabinet decisions may include requirements for evaluations of implementation and outcomes (Wilkins 2011).

The rapid emergence and integration of digital technologies into the daily lives of people, businesses, and governments provide new opportunities for government collaboration and public administration reforms more generally (Katsonis and Botros 2015; OECD 2014; Rowland-Campbell et al. 2014). The change from static read-only websites to more dynamic and dialogue-based applications such as social networking sites, blogs and wikis has led to the use of the term ‘Web 2.0’, while the term ‘Government 2.0’ points similarly to the use of new collaborative tools and approaches by government agencies. Much is expected of these changes, with a Digital Transformation Office housed in the Prime Minister’s Department having a goal of seamless digital services joining the three levels of government (Easton 2015). Collaboration will be essential to this task, but it is yet to be seen whether and to what extent the digital technologies help overcome or bypass the traditional barriers to effective collaboration.

Despite the practical attention paid to collaboration within government, Blackman (2014: 174) has argued that there has been little academic research or a systematic study into the successes and limitations of approaches to collaboration. However, interest by researchers is evident, with ANZSOG producing a monograph of contributed papers on collaborative governance (O’Flynn and Wanna 2008) and

1  
2  
3 a recent book focusing on connecting across  
4 boundaries to achieve goals (O’Flynn et al.  
5 2014).

6 In looking at lessons from experiences of col-  
7 laboration, key areas of uncertainty have been  
8 identified, including that:

9  
10 [f]rom within government there is a belief that  
11 collaboration works best when responsibilities  
12 are clear and when a lead agency or ‘champion’  
13 has been selected. Is this empirically valid? Can  
14 responsibilities be clearly separated in collabora-  
15 tive ventures and can leadership be successfully  
16 anointed in an a priori manner? How can the  
17 momentum for collaboration be generated and  
18 sustained? (Wanna 2008: 11).

19 In this paper, we examine these and other  
20 questions through the work of independent  
21 watchdog agencies such as Auditors-General  
22 and Ombudsmen. Reports by these agencies  
23 provide an important yet largely untapped  
24 source of independent evidence and analysis  
25 regarding collaboration and governance prac-  
26 tices. We first summarise how watchdogs have  
27 approached collaboration before explaining the  
28 sources we have drawn on in our research. We  
29 then summarise the findings from our analy-  
30 sis of 112 watchdog reports as context for the  
31 detailed examination of three reports focused  
32 on child protection issues. We then analyse the  
33 findings in light of the broader literature before  
34 concluding.

### 35 36 *Watchdogs Providing Information and* 37 *Guidance* 38

39 Reports by Auditors-General and Ombudsmen  
40 provide independent information, findings, and  
41 recommendations about how well collabora-  
42 tion is being practised across a broad range of  
43 settings. Sometimes collaboration is their di-  
44 rect focus, and on other occasions the need for  
45 collaboration becomes evident in reporting on  
46 performance.

47 Watchdog reports tend to focus on areas  
48 where performance can be improved rather than  
49 documenting areas that are performing well  
50 and may give emphasis to clear and control-  
51 lable goals, sufficient authority and informa-  
52 tion, and clear consequences (Bemelens-Videc

2003; Wilkins and Boyle 2011). It has been  
observed that over time Auditor-General ap-  
proaches to performance audits have accom-  
modated multi-agency projects with a focus on  
joined-up work (Wilkins and Lonsdale 2007).

Some watchdog reports make a case for col-  
laboration by interpreting legislation, by as-  
sessing the policy context, and by direct asser-  
tion of its importance for effective services. For  
instance, the Auditor-General of NSW identi-  
fied that government agencies and licensees  
needed to work together to reduce alcohol-  
related crime (Auditor-General NSW 2008: 2)  
whereas the Australian Capital Territory (ACT)  
Auditor-General cited a National Framework to  
argue that many portfolio areas as well as fam-  
ilies, communities, and business all have a role  
in child protection (Australian Capital Territory  
(ACT) Auditor-General’s Office 2013: 146).

Indeed, watchdogs provide evidence-based  
analysis and use illustrative case studies of  
practical problems to make the case for im-  
proved collaboration. For instance, a report by  
the Queensland Ombudsman in 2013 illustrated  
the impact on citizens of the lack of coordina-  
tion between agencies where a citizen was told  
after an extended period that their complaint  
to an agency was not within its jurisdiction or  
where no agency would accept responsibility  
for an issue (Queensland Ombudsman 2013).

Watchdogs have also identified that collab-  
oration is only applicable where it enables the  
achievement of results “. . . that could not have  
been achieved by any one of the agencies work-  
ing alone”, pointing to various risks to coordi-  
nation as well as benefits (Australian National  
Audit Office (ANAO) 2012: 39–40).

Additionally, some but not all watchdogs  
have adopted the practice of producing better  
practice guides based on findings from their  
investigations (Wilkins and Lonsdale 2007).  
The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO)  
is one such watchdog and issued jointly with  
the Department of Prime Minister and Cabi-  
net (PM&C) a Better Practice Guide on pol-  
icy implementation that pointed to the need  
to consider both the costs and benefits of  
collaboration (ANAO and PM&C 2014: 25).  
More specifically, the Commonwealth Auditor-  
General identified a better practice principle

relating to the content of cross-agency agreements after reviewing 200 agreements between Commonwealth agencies (ANAO 2010: 24).

Watchdog reports also have impacts that include improving performance and contributing to accountability. These benefits potentially arise from many different aspects of the report development and publication process (Loocke and Put 2011). Process stages where such impacts can be felt include anticipation during the investigation, the implementation of recommendations, the wider application of learnings, media coverage, and parliamentary debates and committee hearings.

Notwithstanding this existing body of work, watchdog reports have not been used extensively by researchers or practitioners as a source of information on sector-wide collaboration issues. Having recognised this, our research project drew on 112 reports of Auditors-General and Ombudsmen and their analysis of collaboration issues, organised in relation to the three domains of governance, capacity, and information.

**Method**

We used a broad-based search strategy to identify a pool of potential reports by Australian and New Zealand Auditors-General and Ombudsmen. The first phase involved scanning the listings of reports for the period of 2009 to 2014, identifying significant earlier reports, and discussions with the Heads of Performance Audit and Deputy Ombudsman to identify reports that addressed collaboration in some way. In all, 112 reports were found to have content relevant to collaboration in the context of this paper (Table 1). Two-thirds of the reports were by Auditors-General while the most prominent jurisdiction was Victoria, which made up almost 30% of the total. The years when the reports were tabled in Parliament ranged from 1998 to 2015.

In a second phase, the 112 reports were subjected to a high-level review of their contents to identify reports that had substantive material regarding collaboration and related governance issues. Nine of the 112 reports were

**Table 1. Characteristics of the 112 reports found to have content relevant to collaboration in the context of this project: number and years when tabled in Parliament**

	Auditor-General	Ombudsman	Total
Commonwealth	8	6	14
	2007–2014	2009–2014	
ACT	3	0	3
	2013		
NSW	9	10	19
	2006–2013	2011–2014	
NT	2	1	3
	2010–2013	2011	
NZ	7	1	8
	2007–2015	2011–2013	
Qld	6	2	8
	2004–2014	2011–2013	
Tas	2	0	2
	2011–2013		
Vic	19	14	33
	2008–2014	2009–2014	
WA	19	3	22
	1998–2014	2011–2014	
Total	75	37	112

selected because they were identified as having rich content regarding collaboration. They were analysed in detail to gain deeper insights into the approaches to collaboration involved.

A comparison of the characteristics of collaboration found in the literature, in conjunction with the review of watchdog reports, identified three broad collaboration domains relevant to the report material, namely: governance, capacity, and information. These encompass many of the characteristics identified in the literature such as formal structures, culture and leadership (O’Flynn et al. 2014); or clear mandate, shared understanding of objectives and capabilities (Blackman 2014). However, a number of characteristics identified in the literature were not included within these three domains as they are matters of broad context and are not typically addressed by watchdogs in their reports. For instance, we omitted characteristics identified by others such as power and politics, formal structures, and budget (O’Flynn et al. 2014).

The three collaboration domains and related characteristics were developed and refined

**Q2**

1 progressively through the course of the re-  
2 search. Reports were reviewed by reading ex-  
3 ecutive summaries, using key word searches,  
4 reading relevant text and manually categorising  
5 the characteristics identified, and cataloguing  
6 relevant examples. The judgements involved  
7 were made by the first-named author taking  
8 account of the discussions with Heads of Per-  
9 formance Audit and Deputy Ombudsman, and  
10 reviewed by the two other authors of this paper.  
11 Although this approach identified a large num-  
12 ber of reports incorporating relevant content,  
13 it should be recognised that it did not identify  
14 all the possible reports or all the relevant con-  
15 tent in the reports selected, and what follows  
16 needs to be regarded as illustrative rather than  
17 definitive.  
18  
19  
20  
21

### 22 ***Key Issues Identified from 112 Watchdog*** 23 ***Reports***

24 Some of the key issues identified along with  
25 some of the recommended public sector re-  
26 sponses are presented in Table 2.  
27

28 Overall, the reports reviewed identified a  
29 wide range of practices and factors that sup-  
30 port and hinder working together. It was clear  
31 that governance issues were raised more often  
32 than the other two domains and that there was  
33 only limited or no coverage of some aspects  
34 of capacity including issues around leadership,  
35 commitment, and relationships.

36 Care is needed in considering the summary  
37 content of Table 2 as it generalises interpreta-  
38 tions and findings based on specific evidence  
39 in individual watchdog reports. However, the  
40 table does enable a high-level assessment of  
41 the collaboration issues identified and in do-  
42 ing so, shows that the watchdog reports have  
43 addressed some of the key problems and iden-  
44 tified the appropriate responses implemented  
45 by the public sector.

46 Also, as already noted, there is an inher-  
47 ent bias in the sample of collaboration is-  
48 sues addressed in watchdog reports as such re-  
49 ports mainly include areas where performance  
50 is problematic. However, the frequency with  
51 which their reports raised concerns indicates  
52 that public sector effectiveness and efficiency

is likely to be constrained by problems encoun-  
tered with key aspects of collaboration.

The importance of selecting a governance  
model for working together is illustrated in a  
report by the Victorian Auditor-General that  
observed that the model of a Secretaries' Group  
did not encourage collaboration or coherence  
and concluded that there had been:

a siloed approach in the past which worked  
against achieving vital collaboration between  
stakeholders. Yet the model chosen . . . perpet-  
uated the model of multiple stakeholders each  
responsible for their own piece of the recovery  
task . . . Without clear authority and with fund-  
ing controlled by each department, the key gov-  
ernance committee . . . inevitably had a coord-  
ination rather than a leadership role (Victorian  
Auditor-General 2013: viii).

Regarding formalised agreements, the Com-  
monwealth Auditor-General observed in a re-  
port reviewing 200 agreements that formal  
written agreements between the Common-  
wealth agencies were frequently used to fa-  
cilitate productive cross-agency relationships.  
However, it noted that many overlooked key  
provisions and important aspects of relation-  
ship management, risk management, outcome  
reporting and review, and that “[i]n many in-  
stances, the agreements provided only a per-  
functory basis for building inter-agency col-  
laboration” (ANAO 2010: 17).

Capacity is raised as a broad issue in rela-  
tion to collaboration in watchdog reports that  
address government's relationships with not-  
for-profit organisations. For instance, a re-  
port by the Commonwealth Ombudsman on  
funding agreements with regional and remote  
Indigenous organisations highlighted the im-  
portance of assessing the capability of those  
organisations. It cites an example of an Indige-  
nous organisation that encountered significant  
difficulties in understanding and meeting com-  
plex reporting requirements, stating that this  
was evident at a reasonably early stage in the  
various communication exchanges between the  
parties. This pointed to the need to provide ap-  
propriate training and support (Commonwealth  
Ombudsman 2010).

**Table 2. Key collaboration issues and corresponding recommended public sector approaches**

Issue	Recommended public sector approach
Governance	
Clarity about options for working together including governance models	Analyse relevant options including where responsibilities are shared, and where responsibilities are clearly defined.
Central agency role	Consider giving a central agency overarching responsibility for collaboration by the agencies in the jurisdiction, and clearly identify and differentiate responsibilities and accountabilities of the central agency.
Role of legislation	Assess legislation for barriers to collaboration and use business case analysis to address these.
Formalised agreements	Document when and how collaboration will occur and provide a coherent system.
Risk management, performance monitoring and evaluation	Collaborate in identification and management of risks taking into account collaboration arrangements, performance monitoring, and evaluation; develop approaches to evaluating collaboration directly.
Capacity Capacity	Take into account capacity issues identified in relation to the not-for-profit sector in developing collaboration practice in other contexts.
Leadership, relationships and trust	Develop approaches that take into account the less-tangible enablers of collaboration.
Information Information management	Draw together information and analyse it systematically to support collaboration.
Communicating	Share information to assist in planning and managing programmes and to identify additional opportunities for collaboration.

Information issues including communication and engagement with stakeholders are raised as a way to enhance collaboration. For instance, a report on Perth’s Swan River recommended that the key agency (the Swan River Trust) works with businesses and the community as well as with other government agencies (Auditor General Western Australia (WA) 2014).

**Further Insights Identified from Detailed Review of Three Watchdog Reports**

To gain further insights into key collaboration issues, we drew on three specific watchdog reports from among the nine reports whose content we assessed in detail. The three reports, delivered by three separate watchdogs, investigated aspects of child protection in the context that collaboration between state/territory agencies is widely recognised as an essential component of an effective child protection system (Council of Australian Governments 2009). For

instance, during the second reading speech of the *Western Australian Children and Community Development 2003 Bill* (which later became the *Children and Community Services Act 2004* (CCS Act), the (then) Minister stated that:

[t]he Bill promotes a collaborative approach between the Department for Community Development and other agencies in the provision of social services and provides for interagency cooperation, particularly in relation to the protection and care of children . . . (quoted in Ombudsman WA 2011: 39)

The three reports span the years 2011 to 2014. One by the WA Ombudsman is focused relatively tightly on care planning and involved detailed analysis of case files, whereas the other two by the NSW Ombudsman and ACT Auditor-General are broader investigations of the respective child protection systems. They are:

- 1  
2  
3 (1) *Review of the NSW Child Protection System - Are things improving?* (Ombudsman NSW 2014) which is a follow-up  
4 of an earlier report. The 2014 report  
5 outlines analysis of recent data and dis-  
6 cusses a number of issues relating to the  
7 quality of intra- and inter-agency child  
8 protection practice. It builds on the earlier  
9 report that discussed a number of critical  
10 challenges that needed to be met as part  
11 of reforming the child protection system.  
12  
13 (2) *Planning for children in care: An Om-*  
14 *budsman's own motion investigation into*  
15 *the administration of the care planning*  
16 *provisions of the Children and Commu-*  
17 *nity Services Act 2004* (Ombudsman WA  
18 2011) which looked at how State Govern-  
19 ment agencies have administered the re-  
20 quirements of the CCS Act regarding care  
21 planning for children in care. In particu-  
22 lar the report looked at whether the child  
23 protection agency had established appro-  
24 priate policies and procedures; was ap-  
25 propriately complying with the require-  
26 ments for the preparation, timing, and  
27 review of care plans; and the health  
28 and education agencies were undertaking  
29 their roles in accordance with their agree-  
30 ments with the child protection agency  
31 and with the related policies and proce-  
32 dures of the three agencies.  
33  
34 (3) *Care and Protection System* (ACT  
35 Auditor-General's Office 2013) which  
36 reviewed the Territory's care and pro-  
37 tection services for children and young  
38 people who are considered to be at high  
39 risk and vulnerable, and whether the child  
40 protection agency was providing ade-  
41 quate and immediate support to these  
42 children and young people, and if these  
43 services were being monitored and over-  
44 seen by relevant statutory office holders.

45  
46 Examples of the key collaboration issues  
47 from the three reports (Table 3) illustrate  
48 the broader observations from our review of  
49 the 112 reports. They highlight in relation  
50 to governance the importance of being clear  
51 about responsibilities and the roles of central  
52 agencies, legislation, formalised agreements,

and risk management. They also highlight the importance of collaboration capacity and identify issues of leadership and commitment, and the importance of systematic approaches to information management and effective communication.

### Analysis

Many of the problems regarding collaboration identified in watchdog reports are associated with agencies not following well-established better practice guidance. In general, the problems involved have been known for many years. This raises the question of whether the three common measures to improve collaboration (introducing responsibilities under legislation and policy, the provision of information and guidance, and strengthening third-party oversight) are an effective mix or whether the problems reflect more deep-seated limitations on agencies' abilities to collaborate.

The effectiveness of introducing responsibilities under legislation and policy has theoretical appeal. However, using general statements may not deliver the level of collaboration desired. For instance, the Ombudsman WA report on care planning identified a number of shortcomings in relation to actions agreed between agencies but not carried out (Ombudsman WA 2011). Only one-third of children in the sample had a health assessment and/or medical examination and just one-fifth had documented education plans, even though these were agreed actions. Notwithstanding, the legislation requires that "... in performing functions under this Act, the CEO must endeavour to work in cooperation with public authorities, non-government agencies and service providers" (Ombudsman WA 2011: 26). Given the difficulties in specifying the exact nature and level of collaboration required, it is understandable that a general provision such as this was included in the legislation. However, it is also notable that reciprocal duties to endeavour to cooperate were not imposed on the health and education agencies.

In addition to the generality of the provisions, the incentives and disincentives for im-

**Table 3. Examples of the key collaboration issues drawn from three watchdog reports\***

Issue	Examples drawn from the three reports
Governance Clarity about options for working together including governance models	Recommended that the child protection agency support strong governance processes to drive implementation (NSW).  Identified the responsibility of the lead agency to improve collaboration across government for children, young people and their families (ACT).
Central agency role	Recommended that a central agency consider the observations made in the report as part of its ongoing work to develop and implement a place-based approach to service delivery (NSW).
Role of legislation	Identified that legislation requires interagency cooperation and investigated those cooperative processes (WA). Recommended identification of any legislative amendments needed to facilitate the releasing of information by one agency to another (ACT).
Formalised agreements	Recommended that the agreed processes set out in the MOU be implemented by the nominated agency (WA). Recommended development of a protocol or some other mechanism for cooperatively continuing to work with several relevant agencies to better integrate services internally (ACT).
Risk management, performance monitoring and evaluation	Identified that systematic analysis of risk-related information held by key agencies is required to identify those children who are most in need to direct an appropriate level of resources to this group (NSW). Recommended that agencies collaborate in performance monitoring and evaluation of health care planning for children in care (WA).
Capacity Capacity	Identified as a welcome initiative the investment in a comprehensive NGO industry development strategy for the child and family sector (NSW). Identified that two agencies have focussed on establishing cooperative arrangements between agency staff at the district level and embedding these in district office culture and practice (WA).
Leadership, relationships and trust	Recommended that the child protection agency lead the improvement of across-government collaboration for children, young people and their families (ACT). Recommended that the child protection agency support a clear and practical commitment to collaboration (NSW).
Information Information management	Identified that the system to systematically share and analyse information held collectively by agencies was not adequate (NSW). Recommended that agencies develop a system to ensure that information they share and publically report is accurate and comprehensive (ACT).
Communicating	Recommended documenting all government collaborative programs and initiatives for vulnerable children, young people and their families, and making this information available to relevant government agencies and their staff, the community and the community services sector (ACT). Identified that more effective communication and collaboration between agencies could have avoided problems relating to joint responses to child protection cases (NSW).

\*The three reports are NSW Ombudsman (2014), Ombudsman WA (2011), and ACT Auditor-General's Office (2013).



1  
2  
3 plementation, and the follow-up and oversight  
4 processes involved, may be significant factors  
5 in driving the level of actual collaboration at  
6 any time. Some of the barriers to joined-up  
7 government that have been identified by others  
8 (O'Flynn et al. 2011) indicate approaches such  
9 as introducing responsibilities under legislation  
10 and policy decisions may not, on their own, be  
11 particularly effective.

12 Decisions regarding the appropriate govern-  
13 nance model for a particular collaboration need  
14 to be carefully considered and watchdogs may  
15 need to show persistence in this regard. For in-  
16 stance, the NSW Ombudsman identified in his  
17 2014 report that the issue of shared responsi-  
18 bility raised in his earlier (2011) report had not  
19 been addressed adequately, and that there was  
20 "... scope for more effectively implementing  
21 the notion of 'shared responsibility' for sup-  
22 porting and protecting children" (NSW Om-  
23 budsman 2014: 22).

24 Communication to share information is a basic  
25 element underpinning effective collabora-  
26 tion yet it is often not addressed well. For  
27 instance, the ACT Auditor-General's Office  
28 (2013) observed that although there were many  
29 collaborative programs and initiatives being  
30 progressed, information on these and how they  
31 relate to each other was not readily available.  
32 This led to a recommendation to document  
33 these programs and initiatives, and make the  
34 information available to relevant government  
35 agencies and their staff, the community, and  
36 the not-for-profit community services sector.  
37 The provision of information and guidance by  
38 central agencies and watchdogs is likely to be  
39 an important source of encouragement for both  
40 the motivation and the capacity to collaborate.  
41 But again, based on the efforts already made in  
42 this regard and the continuing problems, it may  
43 not be a response sufficient to actually achieve  
44 improved collaboration. Similarly, third-party  
45 oversight has not of itself been sufficient to  
46 achieve improved collaboration.

47 Critically, this analysis does not indicate that  
48 any of these three approaches should be re-  
49 duced or altered. Considered in the context of  
50 other analyses of the public sector, there are  
51 resonances about the need to give much greater  
52 emphasis to capacity and to take a fuller ac-

count of the wider public administration and  
political contexts. For instance, the identifica-  
tion in the two Ombudsman reports of a com-  
prehensive NGO industry development strat-  
egy and embedding cooperative arrangements  
between agency staff at the district level are im-  
portant (Ombudsman WA 2011 and NSW Om-  
budsman 2014). Indeed, making findings and  
recommendations relating to capacity in future  
may assist in strengthening collaboration.

This is consistent with some of the discussion  
in the literature. For instance, Wanna (2015) of-  
fers hope in relation to the general issue of im-  
proving the public sector's ability to address  
major policy issues, stating that "[m]any of  
the impediments that afflict our current pub-  
lic bureaucracies and public providers are not  
insurmountable or unsolvable. But they will re-  
quire governments to undertake various sys-  
temic transformations of structure, substance  
and process" (Wanna 2015: 6). This is mixed  
with realism as he notes that "[t]here is much  
talk of new governance models, but less actual  
progress on the ground" (2015: 8). He goes  
on to identify the importance of capacity for  
collaboration, noting that in many social and  
economic sectors:

governments feel that they have to collaborate  
to provide services (co-produce, co-design, co-  
deliver, etc.), but have not acquired the necessary  
skills and capabilities to be able to do so success-  
fully and effectively, and their bureaucratic and  
traditional accountabilities may act as a gravita-  
tional pull against such endeavours (Wanna 2015:  
4).

Although it is generally helpful to present  
enablers and barriers for collaboration, it is im-  
portant that the contextual factors are not over-  
looked. By way of example, the Nous Group  
includes as a barrier that:

effective cross-sectoral partnerships can be desta-  
bilised by distinctive characteristics of govern-  
ment and its public servants: changing political  
imperatives, government power as both the rule  
setter and major funder, an inflexible public sec-  
tor culture, poor application of accountability re-  
quirements, and frequent changes of personnel  
(Nous Group 2013: 4).

O'Flynn et al. take this further commenting that:

[c]ollaborative, joined-up working requires a supporting architecture which reshapes structures, systems, incentives, and behaviors and, in the longer-term, cultures and norms. Without careful attention to, and investment in, creating this architecture, most attempts at JUG are doomed to fail, as the power of embedded ways of doing things restrains innovation and undermines cooperation (O'Flynn et al. 2011: 253).

Systematic approaches to assessing organisational capacity for change have been developed for information technology projects over many years (Office of the Auditor General of Canada 2011). An assessment in the Australian context has focused on organisations working together in joined-up initiatives, finding that "... not only does there need to be readiness in terms of the change itself, but that there also needs to be readiness in the capacity of the organisation to work together, both within and across organisations" and providing a diagnostic tool that enables organisations to assess their preparedness for complex change of this type (Blackman et al. 2013: 1).

Case study work undertaken in five agencies indicated that seven macro-level elements (three enablers and four barriers) made a difference for all of the cases:

Enablers: Clear Mandate and Central Leadership, Pattern Breaking Behaviour, and Shared Understanding of Objectives and Outcomes; and Barriers: Organisational Focus, Operational Structure and 'Core Business', Staff Turnover, Decision Making and Capabilities, and Misalignment of Evaluation and Accountability (Blackman et al. 2013: 7).

In general, these enablers and barriers align with the watchdog reports, although "Pattern Breaking Behaviour" and "Decision Making and Capabilities" are areas that correspond with aspects that were not addressed extensively by watchdogs. The creation of such a diagnostic tool opens a way for public sector agencies and watchdogs to tackle this issue more systematically in future.

A further question relates to changes in the external environment that may be critical to ad-

vancing public sector collaboration. One possible driver of change could be technology-based innovation. It has been stated that "[t]ruly new ideas cut across our silos" and that "[t]he citizen's view and experience of government is not siloed, and nor will the solutions to their needs be. Silos are becoming less important, while integration and collaboration are becoming more so" (Beauchamp 2015). These comments point to pressures and potentially disruptive changes that demand rapid progress and change in relation to collaboration for the public sector to remain relevant and effective.

The watchdog reports reviewed rarely addressed specifically how digital technologies have affected collaboration. An example of where this is addressed is the brief mention of progress of a trial with partner agencies of a child protection e-reporting system, with an increase in the number of e-reports associated with an expansion of the trial (NSW Ombudsman 2014). This is an area that could be considered more frequently in future investigations as it may help explain changes that have been observed as well as opportunities to improve collaboration going forward. Some watchdogs have already looked closely at the planning and implementation of Government 2.0 initiatives (see for example Auditor-General New Zealand 2013 and Victorian Auditor-General 2015), so for them it will be readily possible to look at how they are affecting collaboration.

It will also be relevant for watchdogs to remain agile in recognising and responding to changes of these kinds. Their capacity to do so is illustrated by comments made by the New Zealand Auditor-General that "[i]nnovation by its nature cannot be a 'paint by numbers' exercise" (Auditor-General New Zealand 2015: 3). She supported the flexible approach taken by a Ministry to setting up and managing partnerships with industry and argued that when forming new partnerships it is important to foster trust and appropriately manage risk rather than rigidly keep to a set formula.

## Conclusion

Watchdog reports provide important insights into the problems encountered by public

sector agencies when seeking to collaborate with each other and third parties. Our analysis of 112 reports shows that problems that have been known for many years continue to constrain public sector effectiveness. Reviewing the findings in the context of public administration research raises questions about the benefit of continuing existing approaches such as introducing responsibilities under legislation and policy decisions, the provision of information and guidance and strengthening third-party oversight. We conclude that organisational capacity for collaboration warrants greater attention and that more systematic approaches are required. Changes in the external environment may place new pressures to collaborate on public sector agencies, indicating the need to pursue innovation in the design and implementation of collaboration arrangements.

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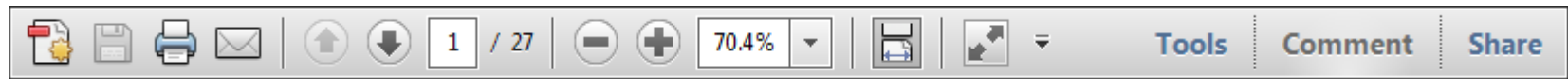
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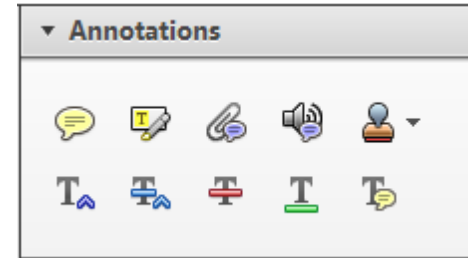
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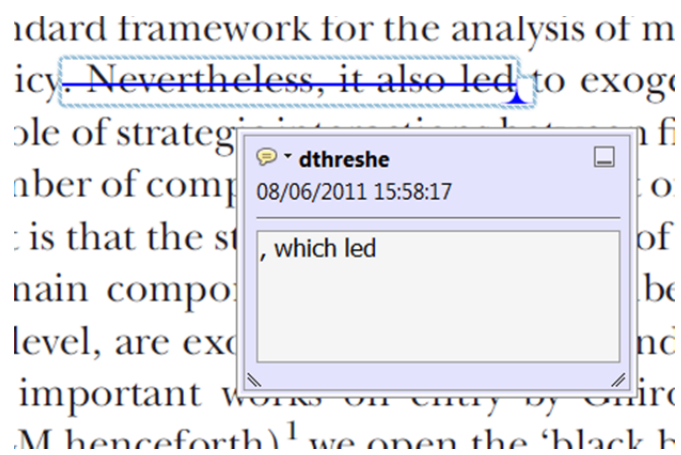
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Strikes a line through text and opens up a text box where replacement text can be entered.

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- Highlight a word or sentence.
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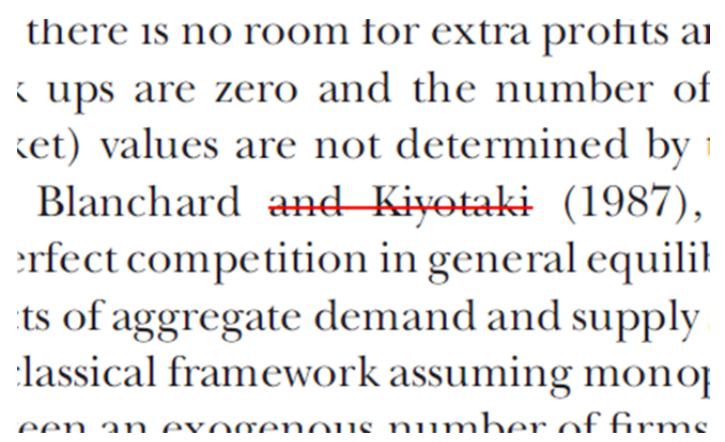
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Strikes a red line through text that is to be deleted.

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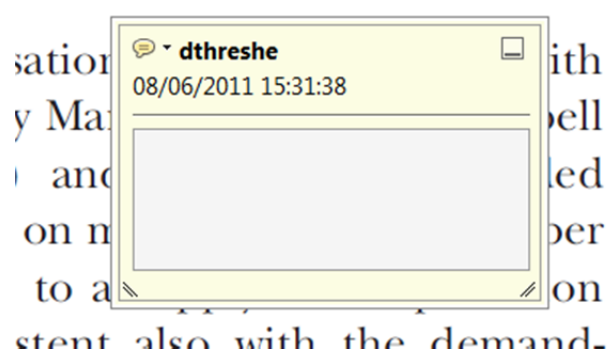
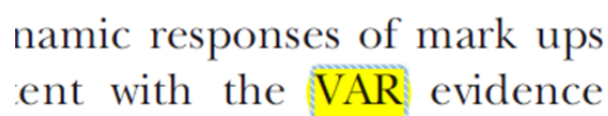
**3. Add note to text Tool – for highlighting a section to be changed to bold or italic.**



Highlights text in yellow and opens up a text box where comments can be entered.

**How to use it**

- Highlight the relevant section of text.
- Click on the [Add note to text](#) icon in the Annotations section.
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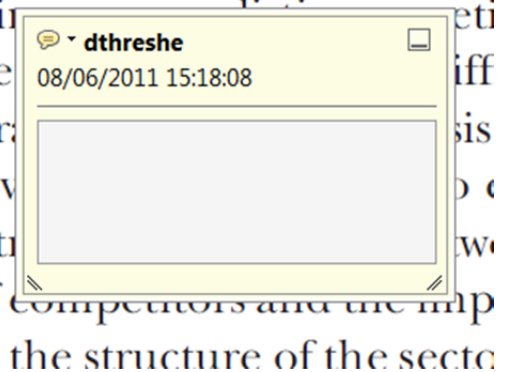
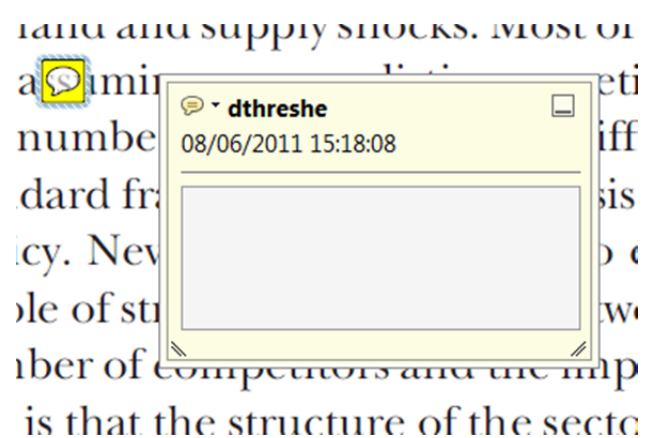
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- Click on the [Add sticky note](#) icon in the Annotations section.
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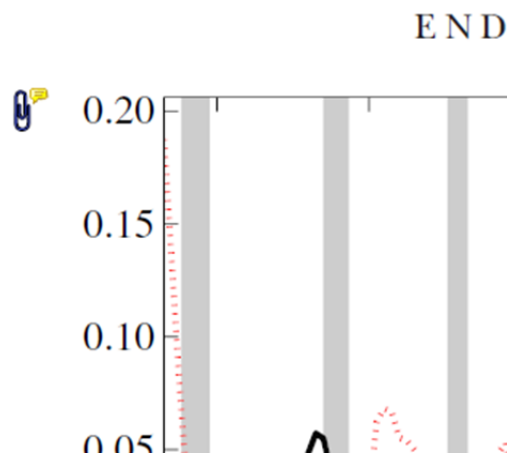
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Inserts an icon linking to the attached file in the appropriate place in the text.

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- Click on the [Attach File](#) icon in the Annotations section.
- Click on the proof to where you'd like the attached file to be linked.
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**6. Add stamp Tool – for approving a proof if no corrections are required.**

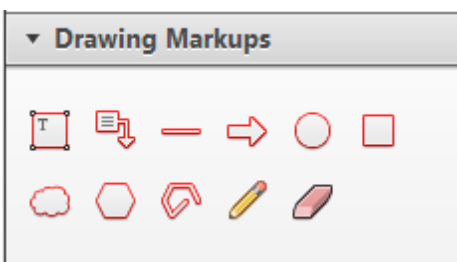


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- Click on the [Add stamp](#) icon in the Annotations section.
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- Click on the proof where you'd like the stamp to appear. (Where a proof is to be approved as it is, this would normally be on the first page).

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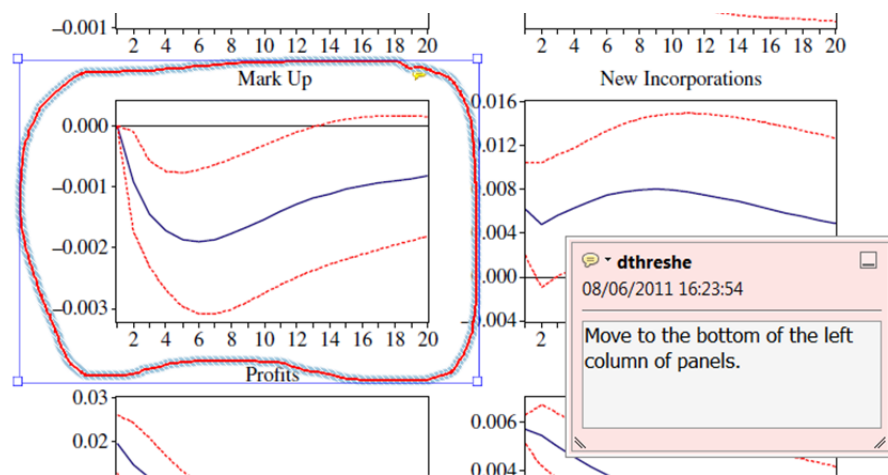


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Allows shapes, lines and freeform annotations to be drawn on proofs and for comment to be made on these marks..

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- Click on one of the shapes in the [Drawing Markups](#) section.
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- To add a comment to the drawn shape, move the cursor over the shape until an arrowhead appears.
- Double click on the shape and type any text in the red box that appears.



For further information on how to annotate proofs, click on the [Help](#) menu to reveal a list of further options:

