

The rhetoric of collaboration: Achieving genuine collaboration in the public procurement of human service delivery - The case of the UK and Australia

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General

Multi-agency service hubs, a location where multiple organisations jointly deliver complex human services have increasingly been used for integrating public services, offering a response to fragmented delivery. We focus specifically on multi-agency hubs as a collaborative institutional form. The underlying aspiration is that bringing professionals together will foster genuine collaboration resulting in better, more efficient government funded service delivery. The enduring question is, are these structures resulting in genuine collaboration and, therefore, in better, more efficient service outcomes?

Research on inter-sector systems in the public procurement of human services delivery has been a longstanding theme in the public management literature (Alford and O’Flynn, 2012; Grout, n.d.), focusing on partnership, multi-agency working, networking, co-operation, value for money and genuine collaboration (for instance, see: Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Provan and Kenis, 2008; Catlaw and Stout, 2016; Butcher and Gilchrist, 2016 and 2020; Parker, 2016; Brandsen et al., 2018; Broadhurst et al., 2021a; Broadhurst et al., 2021b; Parker et al., 2023; Broadhurst and Parker, 2025).

However, there is a knowledge gap in terms of the extent to which academic prescriptions are actually impacting the field. This paper reports on an ongoing research program of documentary examination of multi-agency service hub policy in the UK and Australia designed to understand how collaboration is rhetorised and enacted in human services procurement contexts.

The problem

Literature enhances our practice understanding (e.g., Huxham and Vangen, 2012; Cristofoli, 2017) considering: trust (Sørensen and Torfing 2009; Klijn et al, 2010); frameworks facilitating agreement (Vangen and Huxham, 2013); and complex institutional interests and power dynamics (Cornforth et al, 2018). The also describes the attributes of effective collaboration (Butcher et al, 2018).

Challenges include the impact of: poorly understood authorization frameworks; inappropriate public sector policy frameworks; traditional public sector accountability requirements; and power differentials (Butcher and Gilchrist, 2016; Wilkins and Gilchrist, 2016). As such, there is a clear difference between what policy makers say and what occurs.

In this paper, we seek to explore this conundrum by examining:

(1) how multi-agency hubs differently conceptualise compared to the attributes of genuine collaborative service delivery; (2) in what ways these differing genuine collaborative logics can interact, complement, or cause conflict when brought together; and (3) what theoretical insights emerge from comparing genuine collaboration embedded in procurement frameworks with actual practice.

Analysis will be based on documentary examination of multi-agency service hub policy in the UK and Australia—two Westminster-based governing structures but with differing operational structures—to understand how collaboration is theorised in human services contexts and in public procurement.

Method

Adopting a qualitative documentary analysis approach, the study examines two case study sites; a Family Hub and a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub in the UK, and two multi-agency human services hubs in Australia.

We examine how collaboration is conceptualised and theorised (Prior 2003; Bowen 2009). Documents are treated not as neutral accounts but as sites where institutional logics, including the distinct logics of collaboration and procurement, are produced and sometimes obscured (Atkinson and Coffey 2011). The analysis draws on relevant publicly available policy and strategy documents (Gilchrist and Perks, 2023a). Documents were selected because they set out the vision, governance, and operational frameworks for hub delivery; the texts most likely to articulate the logics shaping how collaboration is designed and intended to function.

The analysis proceeds in two stages: (1) examines how collaboration is conceptualised within each case; and (2) attends specifically to how, or whether, procurement and contracting arrangements are addressed, employing a 'reading for absence' approach where such logics are silent or missing (Prior, 2003).

The comparative design is theoretically purposeful. The UK cases operate under a local procurement model in which one partner acts as contracting authority, while the Australian cases reflect a top-down, funder-driven approach. However, in both cases, a Westminster system of democratic government prevails, thus allowing us confidence as the policy drivers (Gilchrist, 2018). Examining

both contexts allows the analysis to assess whether disconnection between collaborative and procurement logics is nationally contingent or represents a more fundamental gap in multi-agency hub theory.

Expected findings

Although the documentary analysis is ongoing, we anticipate three interrelated findings. First, the comparative design to reveal a meaningful structural contrast between the two national contexts: in the UK, procurement responsibility is locally determined, with one partner body assuming the role of contracting authority on behalf of the hub, while in Australia hub development is more typically shaped by nationally-driven, funder-directed commissioning, producing a top-down logic that sits uneasily alongside the collaborative rhetoric of hub policy. Second, and more strikingly, we anticipate that procurement and contracting will be largely absent from hub policy and strategy documents in both countries; that texts explicitly concerned with multi-agency collaboration will make little or no reference to the contractual arrangements that necessarily underpin them. Further, we expect that the rhetoric of collaboration will be deployed in publicly-facing documents while contracts will be complex, precise and devoid of opportunities for situationally relevant practices to be adopted in favour of applying commonly accepted regulatory procurement processes. Third, and most theoretically significant, we expect to find that where collaboration is addressed, documents fail to account for how genuine collaborative practice will be sustained, or potentially undermined, by the contracting frameworks operating beneath it. In particular, documents will fail to provide a framework and permission for the operation of a situationally appropriate authorisation space which would support genuine collaboration. Together, these findings would point to a systematic disconnection between the collaborative logics inscribed in hub policy and the procurement logics that structure their delivery in practice.

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