1 The Necessity of Interagency Collaboration

This is the hardest challenge there is; when agency goals compete with collective goals, agency goals almost always win.

(Lewis Holden, Chief Executive, Ministry for Culture and Heritage)

The question of how the component parts of government should organize themselves has long been central to the field of public administration. Governments around the world have found it necessary to divide up their administrations into smaller units with more manageable scopes, allowing problems to be assigned wholly to one of the disaggregated agencies. Such specialization along organizational divisions of labour has been hailed as an ‘engine of value creation’, having its roots in the first streams of organizational theory (March and Simon 1958; Bardach 1998).

Divisions between agencies proved effective in addressing some issues. In the 1980s and 1990s, many jurisdictions implemented a range of reforms that later became known as ‘New Public Management’ (NPM), adding strong vertical hierarchies to narrow-focus agencies, reinforced by accountability systems and incentives. The reforms were influenced by neoliberal market theory and were intended to address fiscal pressures produced by various financial crises (Scott 2001). Broadly speaking, these reforms achieved their intended efficiency gains but also brought some unintended consequences and exacerbated other existing challenges. The interaction of strong vertical lines of accountability and highly specialized agencies encouraged the proliferation of ‘silied working, a term that will be familiar for its now ubiquitous derision from both inside and outside government. While collaboration has never been easy, years of emphasizing vertical hierarchies have left many governments ill-equipped to work horizontally (Boston et al. 1996). Collaboration must be ‘retrofitted’ into an NPM system that did not inherently encourage it (Eppel and O’Leary 2021, p. 1).

In the complex, volatile world of the twenty-first century, the most persistent problems facing public administrators span agency boundaries (O’Leary 2014). In part, this is the result of past successes – more progress has been made on those problems that could be addressed effectively by agencies working in siloes. Consequently, the most pressing problems that remain tend to be the ones that span agency boundaries. Elsewhere, it is the result of past failures – some problems that governments thought could be solved in siloes have proven resistant to policy intervention, and governments now realize that making progress on these less-tractable problems requires agencies to work together. Other drivers and factors such as heightened interdependency and uncertainty (Thomson 2001; Thomson and Perry 2006; Emerson et al. 2012) feed into the
increased interest in and necessity of collaboration. Bardach (1998) suggests that systemic features of public management indicate abundant opportunities to create public value through collaboration, by both increasing performance and reducing costs. Working together provides more levers for solving problems and access to more resources (Krueger 2005). Thus, work that spans agency boundaries has emerged as the ‘new normal’ for public servants (Carey and Harris 2016, p. 112).

Yet, for a variety of reasons, collaboration is a fraught and frequently costly endeavour (Sullivan et al. 2012). Interagency collaboration consists of ongoing negotiation, which has significant coordination costs compared to the efficiency of a simple hierarchy (Van Huyck et al. 1990). Without hierarchy, decision-making requires time-consuming consensus building in order to be supported overall (Ren et al. 2005). Imperfect alignment of collaborative goals may introduce the risk of some parties opportunistically pursuing their individual goals (Laan et al. 2011). Even when collaboration is successful, the transaction costs tend to be very high (Scott and Boyd 2020). Interagency collaboration has accordingly been referred to in the field of public administration as both the ‘philosopher’s stone’ (Jennings and Krane 1994) and ‘holy grail’ (Peters 1998).

1.1 Contribution of This Element

Interagency collaboration has attracted significant attention in public administration literature; indeed, questions of how to collaborate effectively are the ‘most discussed questions involved in the performance of public institutions and the achievement of public purpose’ (Kettl and Kelman 2007, p. 45). We were therefore sceptical that the field needed another book on this topic, one that would revisit many of the same observations and arguments. However, this Element is intended as something a little different – focusing not on how to do interagency collaboration but instead on exploring when public servants employ different approaches, arrangements, or models to address different problem contexts. We wrote it because of a recognition that the treatment of interagency collaboration is lacking – many researchers continue to seek, and report on, the success factors that will make collaboration easy, without specifying how such factors are reliant on context (a limitation observed by O’Toole and Meier 2004, Chen 2010, Sedgwick 2017, and Prentice et al. 2019).

The first significant contribution of this Element is in reconceptualizing the field of collaboration as a set of contingent responses applied to specific contexts. Carey and Crammond’s (2015) evidence synthesis explored the question of ‘what works’ in interagency collaboration and found scant overlap except at the broadest levels. Instead, as observed by Prentice et al. (2019),
best practice requires a deliberate deployment of different collaborative arrangements to solve equally different problems. The specific focus on contingency – applying different solutions to different problems and problem settings – sets this Element apart from other research in the discipline to provide an example of how one jurisdiction answers the sorely neglected question of when different collaborative models should be used.

While few authors explicitly claim that their findings represent a single universal best practice, it is an implicit part of identifying generalizable success factors for interagency collaboration. This is a trap into which even the authors of this Element have fallen in the past, reporting that collaborative success could be supported by focusing on a small number of problems, setting measurable targets, and assigning shared responsibility to a few senior leaders (Scott and Bardach 2019; Scott and Boyd 2020; Scott and Merton 2021). Across a similar period, another group of New Zealand researchers studied different collaborative case studies and concluded that what was needed was a ‘guardian angel’, ‘entrepreneur’, and ‘fellow travellers’ (Eppel et al. 2014). Neither group delineated where and when their unique findings might apply.

The contention that collaborative approaches should be contingent echoes developments in the broader field of management. ‘Scientific’ management pursued universal best practice (Taylor 2004), and when universality proved elusive, the field became increasingly interested in the ways that good management practices differed depending on context (Woodward 1965). Similar developments can be observed in public administration, where simple and universal solutions have gradually been replaced with more nuanced and contingent solutions (see examples later in this section).

Some ground has been broken on a contingent approach to interagency collaboration (Lee and Scott 2019), with calls for a ‘collaborative toolbox’ or ‘dimensional approach to collaboration’, in which different collaborative practices are indicated by different contextual factors (Prentice et al. 2019, p. 792). This Element goes even further to directly address the core question raised by O’Toole and Meier (2004), Chen (2010), Sedgwick (2017), Lee and Scott (2019), and Prentice et al. (2019) – given the variety of possible collaboration arrangements, when should each be used?

This contribution should not, however, be overstated. While the Element presents a contingent approach to collaboration within the New Zealand central government, it is also limited by that context. It cannot answer the question of whether such arrangements would respond effectively to central government collaboration in other jurisdictions, to local government, or to cross-sectoral collaboration. Nonetheless, it provides an example of a contingent approach in
action that may inspire similar approaches elsewhere, potentially with a different set of contingencies.

This Element’s second area of contribution is to fill a methodological niche in the study of interagency collaboration. The key point of departure is in the unit of analysis. Literature on collaboration often reports detailed findings from individual case studies (e.g., Walter and Petr 2000; Darlington et al. 2005; Noonan et al. 2008), or from comparisons of cases deemed similar for the purpose of reporting commonality of structures and tools, politics, and craft (e.g., Bardach 1998; Bogdanor 2005; Peters 2015; Agranoff 2017). Periodically, when the findings of collaborative governance literature become too disorganized and contradictory, authors will conduct a meta-analysis or evidence synthesis, reporting common themes that often become vague or anodyne (e.g., McGuire 2006; Carey and Crammond 2015) as they seek to draw out commonality from what we argue are different solutions to different problems.

These methodologies gloss over the diversity of collaborative arrangements and their problem contexts and result in a failure to map different problems with their best corresponding collaborative solutions. Several authors have noted that this is an area where ‘collaborative practice is ahead of scholarship’ (Prentice et al. 2019, p. 792; similar sentiments in McGuire 2002; Bryson et al. 2015; Lee and Scott 2019). This Element, therefore, explores the topic both as a theoretical exercise and as an integrated case study of a single jurisdiction – New Zealand. Doing so allows for a more detailed examination of the internal logic and elements embedded in one government’s coherent system of interagency collaboration. We argue that it is primarily the logic of this contingent framework that is interesting and have not evaluated whether the presence of such a framework has improved performance, though we note a positive reception by those public servants who use it.

The third contribution made by this Element is in documenting practices in a jurisdiction of high international interest. New Zealand has occupied this position of interest in public administration for several decades, having moved further and faster than other nations in implementing the NPM reforms of the 1980s (Pallott 1999). The reforms resulted in a highly efficient but fragmented system not easily able to address problems that fall outside single-agency remits (Boston et al. 1996). New Zealand’s public service is regularly considered high performing (Halligan 2004), with a history of reflective practice that actively engages with public administration theory (Donadelli and Lodge 2019; Scott et al. 2022). It continues to be highly regarded as a leader in administrative practice (Craft and Halligan 2020; Scott et al. 2020).
Despite this reputation for high performance, many authors note that the New Zealand public service has occasionally struggled to collaborate effectively (Eppel et al. 2014; O’Leary 2014), operating more as a constellation of independent actors rather than a coherent whole (Jensen et al. 2014). In this context, the collaborative practices described in this Element represent a response to a perceived weakness or challenge. We cannot claim that the collaborative practices used in New Zealand are the most successful, or even that the dimensions for differentiating a contingent approach are the most salient. Such claims could require much greater testing, replication, and rigorous analysis. Nor can we claim that New Zealand practices are fully generalizable – at the very least, key features like a unitary (not federal) and parliamentary system of government will make a difference. Instead, we present the case study as an example of contingency-in-action, identifying the ways in which one nation is contending with the multitude of problems that require collaborative solutions.

1.2 Defining Interagency Collaboration

The vast body of collaboration literature offers a variety of overlapping and conflicting language and definitions for describing similar practices. In this text, we use the term ‘interagency collaboration’ to refer broadly to agencies working together to achieve a specific purpose. However, we also explore how similar language is used elsewhere, locating this text within its disciplinary context. In the most general sense, interagency collaboration refers to a range of practices that involve agencies working together (Axelsson and Axelsson 2006). Bardach also offers an inclusive definition of collaboration as ‘any joint activity by two or more agencies that is intended to increase public value by their working together rather than separately’ (1998, p. 8). However, some authors use the term more specifically, differentiating it from other modes of interagency working such as ‘cooperation’ or ‘coordination’ (e.g., Marrett 1971; Gregson et al. 1992; Huxham and Macdonald 1992; Gajda 2004; Sadoff and Grey 2005; Thomson and Perry 2006; Horwath and Morrison 2007; Keast et al. 2007; Eppel et al. 2014). Many of these same authors consider coordination, cooperation, and collaboration as part of a spectrum of interagency working, usually from ‘distant’ to ‘close’, and where closer collaboration is more difficult and often requires shared history to execute effectively (Marrett 1971; Huxham and Macdonald 1992; Brown and Keast 2003; Gajda 2004).

For example, Gray (1989) suggests that collaboration takes place over a longer period, while cooperation and coordination are sometimes its precursors, taking place over shorter periods. Keast et al. (2007) similarly see cooperation and coordination as an earlier stage of a more distant connection,
involving information-sharing and planning together, while collaboration takes the next step into actually performing actions together. Eppel et al. (2014) add that collaboration corresponds to shared responsibility, while cooperation and coordination would at most involve common interests. The conception of collaboration as a spectrum is supported by evidence that relationships mature, and trust is built as agreements are reached, conflicts resolved, and commitments delivered (Ostrom 1998; Huxham and Vangen 2000; Koppenjan and Klijn 2004; Ansell and Gash 2008). In summation, Thomson and Perry’s survey of the literature concludes that collaboration can only be defined in contrast with cooperation and coordination, as involving deeper ‘interaction, integration, commitment and complexity’ (2006, p. 23). This text borrows the concept of a spectrum, but goes further in suggesting that some types of interagency work are more appropriate in different contexts; different forms of interagency work do not simply differ in their complexity but are more suitable for responding to different problems.

1.2.1 Collaborative Governance, Network Governance, and Joined-Up Government

This text is primarily concerned with how government agencies can collaborate effectively in different contexts. These processes and functions can be broadly grouped as ‘governance’, defined by Bevir (2012) as the processes of interaction of an organized society over a social system. Thus, how government agencies can collaborate could be described as ‘collaborative governance’, though this phrase has been used elsewhere with a specific meaning.

Ansell and Gash (2008), having identified wide-ranging use of terminology as a barrier to theory building, define the term ‘collaborative governance’ restrictively, stressing the inclusion of non-state actors, whether non-governmental organizations (NGOs), business representatives, community leaders, stakeholder groups, or other individual members of civil society. In contrast, Emerson et al. (2012) take a broader view, defining the term to include decision-making processes and structures between any collaborating parties.

Collaborative governance between government agencies differs from collaborative governance in the private sector due to difficulty in attribution of social outcomes (Thompson 2014), complex authorizing environments, and different motivations of public servants (e.g., ‘public service motivation’, Perry and Hondeghem 2008; and ‘mission valence’, Wright and Pandey 2011). Collaboration between government agencies also differs from collaboration involving non-governmental organizations, in that the mechanisms for political control are different, and much of the literature on inter-sectoral collaboration...
emphasizes capacity and capability gaps in non-governmental organizations that are less common in large, well-resourced government agencies (Kania and Kramer 2011). Government agencies usually lack the freedom to choose which other agencies they would like to collaborate with, and when; if two or more agencies don’t have good relationships, they are stuck trying to make an unhappy partnership work regardless (Scott and Bardach 2019). Though not always the case, collaboration in and with other sectors can seek to capitalize on momentary alignment, opportunity, and collaborative ‘windows’ (Takahashi and Smutny 2002).

Interagency collaboration can also be distinguished from the literature on ‘networks’, in that the formal accountabilities of government agencies differ from the looser goal alignment seen in network literature (Jones et al. 1997; Provan and Milward 2001; Keast et al. 2006; Provan and Kenis 2008; Sørensen and Torfing 2016). However, loose and informal networks characterize several of the models in this Element, so the boundary is not absolute.

‘Joined-up government’ is a more recent term to describe collaboration between government agencies, used in an equally mixed body of literature. The term is commonly associated with the UK government under Prime Minister Tony Blair and describes a government that is able to overcome its internal barriers (Bogdanor 2005). Joined-up government is sometimes conceived of as a seamless service experience across multiple agencies (Davies 2009) and sometimes refers more broadly to processes that take a holistic approach to addressing complex policy problems (Carey and Harris 2016; Scott and Boyd 2016).

Ultimately, ‘interagency collaboration’ seemed like the least-bad terminology to describe the activities discussed in this Element. The topic (and related fields) would benefit from greater definitional and categorical clarity, but that is beyond the scope of this text. Both Bingham and O’Leary (2006) and Getha-Taylor et al. (2019) find collaboration research guilty of ‘parallel play’, where researchers in different disciplines are working independently on related problems, but not paying attention to each other’s work. In choosing the term interagency collaboration, we still intend that the discussion be informed by related fields and that interagency collaboration be informed by collaboration in other contexts while acknowledging some limits to transferability.

1.2.2 Describing and Analyzing Collaboration

Such semantic exercises and debates, although common in the body of collaboration literature, are of limited use when it comes to actually understanding the mechanics of collaboration. Despite enormous attention in public administration...
literature, collaboration remains a ‘fraught’ endeavour (Sullivan et al. 2012, p. 41) that is often unable to demonstrate ‘collaborative advantage’ (Huxham and Vangen 2013, p. 1; Doberstein 2016, p. 819). Beyond failing to deliver results, collaboration is expensive, involving high opportunity and transaction costs (Van Huyck et al. 1990; Bardach 2001; Krueger 2005; Head 2013). This is generally observed to be true of all forms of collaboration, and specifically true of interagency collaboration (Davies 2009; Kwon and Feiock 2010). Such costs are usually present in consensus/inclusive decision-making due to inefficiency and include time and effort, as well as the impacts of distrust or frustration (Ren et al. 2005; Doberstein 2016; Scott and Bardach 2019; Waardenburg et al. 2020). Difficulties associated with collaboration also arise from inadequate practices for determining attribution (Thompson 2014) and assigning accountability (Page 2004). Collaboration, the literature reveals, ‘is like cottage cheese; it occasionally smells bad and separates easily’ (Thomson and Perry 1998, p. 409).

There was a time when collaborative practice was a ‘black box’ (Thomson and Perry 2006, p. 20), but there have now been dozens of studies that attempt to shine a light on how public administrators go about collaborating (Diaz-Kope et al. 2015). Thomson and Perry (2006) and Chen (2010) each propose a simple model for understanding collaborative success (and failure), in which ‘contextual factors’ interact with collaborative ‘processes and functions’ to produce a range of outcomes. These can be conceived of as the independent, moderating, and dependent variables (respectively) of collaborative effectiveness (see Figure 1). The contextual category absorbs a range of factors referred to in the literature variously as antecedents, drivers, starting conditions, environmental constraints, history, and needs. Processes and functions include consideration of goals, relationship with political principals, incentives, and funding and resourcing. The desired outcomes can be in the form of public value or assessed through proxy measures for effective collaborative processes and behaviours.

![Figure 1](https://example.com/image.png)

**Figure 1** Examples of independent, moderating, and dependent variables in collaborative effectiveness
O’Leary and Vij (2012, p. 516) outline the need to identify a ‘comprehensive vision of the antecedents, processes, and outcomes’ as a major research challenge for collaboration literature, however, each remains contested. Various authors consider contextual factors in different ways. Some limit their observations to collaboration in a particular context – for example, Prentice et al. (2019) provide a lengthy list of collaboration studies in different policy settings. Others consider the public administration settings in which collaboration is attempted (Eppel and O’Leary 2021). Some authors limit their observations to collaboration between different categories of collaborative partners; for example, Bardach (1998) describes interagency collaboration, Agranoff (2017) describes collaboration between government jurisdictions, and Ansell and Gash (2008) describe collaboration between government and non-government organizations. Others distinguish between collaboration that arises from the top-down versus bottom-up (Chen 2010), or explore the contextual conditions that explain why people want to collaborate (Diaz-Kope and Morris 2019). Donahue (2004) offers a framework for categorizing collaborative contexts across a variety of dimensions: formality, duration, focus (broad versus narrow), institutional diversity (types of actors), number of actors, stability, initiation (by which actors), and problem versus opportunity-driven.

Some studies focus on specific aspects of collaborative processes in trying to understand why some collaborations succeed and others fail. Osborne and Gaebler (1992) conceive of collaboration almost exclusively through formal reorganization, while Bardach specifically excludes structural elements to focus on behaviours and processes (1998). Others describe ‘multidimensional frameworks’ for collaborative processes (Agranoff and McGuire 2003; Imperial 2005; Thomson and Perry 2006; Bowman and Parsons 2013; Prentice et al. 2019). For example, Thomson and Perry (2006) break collaboration down into five dimensions: governance, administration, mutuality, norms, and organizational autonomy. Prentice et al. (2019) describe eleven ‘collaborative tools’ under the categories of structure, governance, and commitment. Several notable texts (McGuire 2002; Ansell and Gash 2008; Bryson et al. 2015) further explore dimensional approaches in the context of network governance, collaborative governance, and cross-sectoral collaboration, respectively.

Even the desired outcomes of collaboration are contested (Carey and Harris 2016; Scott and Boyd 2016), with different possible parameters for determining effectiveness (see Marsh and McConnell 2010 for a broader discussion of ‘success’ in a public administration context). Delays between cause and effect (Carey and Harris 2016), and difficulty in assigning attribution (Thompson 2014), have caused some authors to argue for the use of process measures to determine whether parties are demonstrating collaborative behaviours.
Others compare collaborative behaviours to ‘collaboration theatre’ (Scott and Boyd 2016, p. 238) where much activity results in little of value, and argue instead for a focus on ‘intermediate outcomes’ that balance intrinsic value with attribution and delay (Scott and Boyd 2017, p. 4). In another text in this series, Getha-Taylor (2019) explores the sustainability of collaboration as an important outcome in some contexts.

The literature now includes extensive separate descriptions of contexts, processes, and outcomes. While collaboration is no longer the ‘black box’ it once was, results are still mixed (Thomson and Perry 2006). Several authors have suggested that this is because collaboration is not one thing (O’Toole and Meier 2004; Chen 2010; Sedgwick 2017; Lee and Scott 2019; Prentice et al. 2019) – there are many different contexts for collaboration, and different processes and functions will be more effective in each context. Like these authors, we contend that continued searches for best-practice approaches to collaboration are likely to yield limited results.

### 1.2.3 Social Antecedents to Collaboration

While public administration theory has ‘long emphasised the distinctive character and motives associated with public institutions’ (Perry 1997, p. 181), the past two decades have seen increased attention paid to psychological, behavioural, and social dimensions of public service. Constructs like public service motivation, mission valence, goal commitment, social identity, and interpersonal trust are acknowledged as important predictors of public servant behaviour and contribute to public outcomes (Scott 2019).

Public servants have a range of motivations, including a belief in the value of public institutions and a desire to achieve positive social change (Perry 1996). Public service motivation is enhanced by alignment between the values of the individual and the goals of the agency (‘mission valence’, Wright and Pandey 2011), or in this case, the goals of the collaborative activity. This is related to ‘goal commitment’, which refers to the volitional bond between public servants and achievement of the collaborative goal (Locke et al. 1988). Even the most successful collaborations are not without pain, cost, and frustration; in these situations, collaboration is sometimes sustained over time and able to overcome setbacks when the participants were strongly committed to the goal (Scott and Merton 2021; Scott and Boyd 2022).

Collaboration is easier between people who feel like they are on the same team, with more resource sharing and charity concern (Brewer and Hewstone 2004; Scott 2019). ‘Social identity’ refers to the branch of psychology that concerns individuals’ conceptions of themselves as members of groups...