



What makes joint working and joint ventures successful? – insights from the literature

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This paper, written to support an IPANZ roundtable workshop, explores the literature on interagency collaboration, focusing on more formal collaboration including joint ventures. The discussion is limited to collaboration within central government although similar issues arise in international, central-local, public-private, and public-NGO working. It does not attempt to argue for or against any particular collaboration model, but instead to contextualise joint ventures within a contingent framework of interagency collaboration. This summary of the literature is intended to create a shared language and shared understandings for participants in the roundtable.

Rodney Scott and Derek Gill are both members of the IPANZ Board. The paper was prepared in their private capacity and does not represent the views of IPANZ or their respective employers.

Key Points

- *Boundary crossings are inevitable.* Governments divide themselves into smaller and more manageable administrative units, and invariably some problems cross agency boundaries.
- *The challenge of joint working is not new or unique to the NZ public sector.* Working across boundaries is fraught and frequently costly. This is a challenge in New Zealand, but also around the world and throughout history. It is described as the 'holy grail' and 'philosopher's stone' of public administration.
- *Joint working takes a variety of forms.* Collaborative practices can be arranged on a continuum from soft/informal to hard/formal. Joint ventures are at the hardest end of the spectrum and therefore likely apply to only a small subset of problem settings.
- *Some success factors are common.* There are a huge range of extant and available collaborative practices. Some factors are important in all situations (leadership, governance, clarity of purpose and scope, trust, secretariat support), but the precise list of factors varies

by author. Some approaches are trying to take a more contingent approach, matching specific solution types to problem settings.

- *Behavioural and interpersonal skills are key.* Collaboration is slowed down by transaction (information, coordination) costs, but these are sometimes overcome by goal commitment. Regardless of form, collaboration depends on a range of behavioural and interpersonal skills that must be selected for and carefully cultivated.
- *NZ studies identified key roles.* In case studies of bottom-up soft collaboration, entrepreneurs, fellow travellers, and guardian angels all play important roles. It is unclear how these findings apply to hard and formal collaboration, like joint ventures.
- *Joint ventures are the most formal joint working arrangements.* In the private sector joint ventures take two forms: 'equity' joint ventures bring together resources into a separate legal company; 'non-equity' joint ventures share resources through contractual arrangements without combining equity into a separate legal structure.
- *NZ is unique in legislating for public joint ventures.* The Public Service Act 2020 has introduced two joint venture analogues: 'interdepartmental ventures' are used for pooling assets or consolidating shared delivery; and 'interdepartmental executive boards' are used for aligning policy, planning, and budgeting, but when services will continue to be delivered separately. Both are created by Order-In-Council and report to a single responsible minister.
- *There is no literature available directly on public joint ventures.* In the absence of direct evidence, we look at the most comparable analogous structures for guidance on what works. Private sector literature suggests four reasons for joint ventures: to reduce behavioural uncertainty by the other party, to share scarce resources, to share tacit knowledge and learn from each other, or to maintain or reduce real options.
- *Private JVs have a high failure rate.* While private joint ventures are common the failure rates are high (50-70%). Sustained effort and leadership is required to succeed, and that even still the possibility of failure should be anticipated.
- *Durability of JVs is unclear.* Compared with soft/informal solutions, joint ventures are more difficult to establish and are less flexible in the face of innovation, circumstance, or changing political priority. On the other hand, they have higher exit costs, administratively and politically, which may act as a commitment device to help sustain collaborative arrangements over the long term.
- *When to use public JVs.* While 'softer' solutions tend to be cheaper, easier to establish, and more flexible, they are less effective at solving problems that required deep trade-offs against individual agency priorities. When individual agency and collaborative goals came into conflict, individual agency goals tended to prevail. Harder solutions create more formal shared accountability.
- *Critical success factors for JVs.* From other literatures, the following conditions may make public JV success more likely:
 - Use only when other 'softer' solutions are inadequate
 - Clear, aligned, and mutually understood objectives
 - Careful due diligence, to identify resources, scope, and remit
 - Few parties involved
 - Relatively balanced implicit and explicit power between parties
 - Trusting relationships between parties
 - A sense of shared identity and being on the same team

Why do we need to work across agency boundaries?

The question of how the component parts of government should organise themselves is central to the field of public administration (Scott and Bardach 2019). In order to manage the delivery of a vast and diverse array of services, governments have found it necessary to divide themselves into smaller administrative units with more manageable scope. Problems have been disaggregated and assigned to different agencies, and specialisation was hailed as an ‘engine of value creation’ (Bardach 1998).

The modern state is involved in providing a complicated array of services to diverse populations. It is impossible for government to be divided in distinct sectors of other groupings that neatly encapsulates every public policy challenge (Hughes and Scott 2021). Problems inevitably span agency boundaries, and governments must work out how to address these cross-cutting problems (Scott and Boyd 2017).

What is known about joint working?

Managing cross-cutting problems remains a fraught and frequently costly endeavour (Sullivan et al. 2012), described as both the ‘philosopher’s stone’ (Jennings and Krane 1994) and ‘holy grail’ (Peters 2015) of public administration. Working across boundaries has been studied extensively, however an evidence synthesis by Carey and Crammond (2015) could report only a small number of findings that were consistently supported as contributing to successful collaboration: interagency groups at multiple strategic and operational levels; collaboration being led both top-down and bottom-up; and decentralised control (in the context of soft collaboration). Other findings varied between studies.

Some authors suggest that this inconsistency is because collaboration is not one thing (O’Toole and Meyer 2004, Chen 2010, Sedgwick 2017, Lee and Scott 2019, Prentice et al. 2019). Instead, there are a variety of problem contexts that are each most suited to different solutions. These are often conceived as a spectrum or continuum either from distant-to-close (Marrett 1971) or from soft-to-hard (Lee and Scott 2019). Variations of the distant-to-close continuum describe the level of overlap or interdependency between different agencies, including co-existence, communication, cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. Soft-to-hard models vary based on their level of structure and formality. Purely ‘soft’ or voluntary models rely on relationships, goodwill and reciprocity. ‘Middle’ models rely on governance, and shared responsibility. ‘Hard’ or formal models involve legal structures, authority, and accountability mechanisms (see Butler et al. 2018, Vitalis and Butler 2019). A new book (Scott and Merton 2022) explores when to use which models in New Zealand.

What New Zealand evidence is available?

Learning from the past is a key rationale for a permanent politically neutral public service (Corbett et al. 2018, 2020). There have also been several studies on the New Zealand public sector that provide local insights; these have been conducted by both academics and public servants, and include case studies, workshops and interviews with public employees.

Ryan and colleagues (2008) used case studies and workshops with New Zealand public employees to research what makes collaboration successful. Across a variety of contexts, Ryan et al. (p15) observed that successful bottom-up collaboration was often preceded by an ‘a-ha!’ moment – “a moment of crisis, emergency, sudden and unexpected appearance, frustration, or realisation experienced by some participant” already trying to manage the issue. For collaboration to succeed, a trio of roles needed to be fulfilled:

- a ‘public entrepreneur’, who “recognises the import of the moment” and “responds in kind with new ways of working”, “act first and seek approval later” and “learn as they go”;

- ‘fellow travellers’, who do not regard themselves as “agency representatives”, and put resources “on the collective table for others to share and use” (p16); and
- a ‘guardian angel’, a more senior manager to mentors, protects, advises and advocates on behalf of the entrepreneur. This was the role that was seen as in the shortest supply in the New Zealand public service, and the handbrake on collaborative innovation.

In this research, soft behavioural factors emerged as more important for the success of collaboration than hard factors driven by the public management system. Combining these different roles with Bardach’s (1998) concept of ‘collaborative capacity’, O’Leary (2014) called on the New Zealand public service to invest in building the skills, competencies, and behaviours required to collaborate effectively. Soft skills tend to be more difficult to evaluate, and therefore may be underrepresented in government evaluations and certain research designs. Nonetheless, public servants continue to report the importance of interpersonal behaviours and relationships that may trump individual machinery of government or governance design choices.

A recent text by Eppel and O’Leary (2021) explored challenges to collaboration in the New Zealand public service. They contend that New Zealand’s system of government, with strong, vertical, individual accountability for outputs, acts as an impediment to collaboration. While collaboration is not prevented under the current system, neither is it encouraged, and they report several challenges:

- “Many public servants cannot see an advantage to collaborating”;
- “Results are demanded too quickly, which negatively affects innovation”;
- “Ministers order specific solutions” while lacking “sufficient knowledge of the problem”;
- “There is a perceived lack of transparency”;
- “Bureaucrats protect their turf”;
- “Each ministry or organization would have to sign off on collaborative decisions, making changes difficult”;
- “There is an unevenness in terms of competence and know-how”;
- “There is a dearth of data, making it virtually impossible to determine the long-term costs or effects of changes on public management.” (p49)

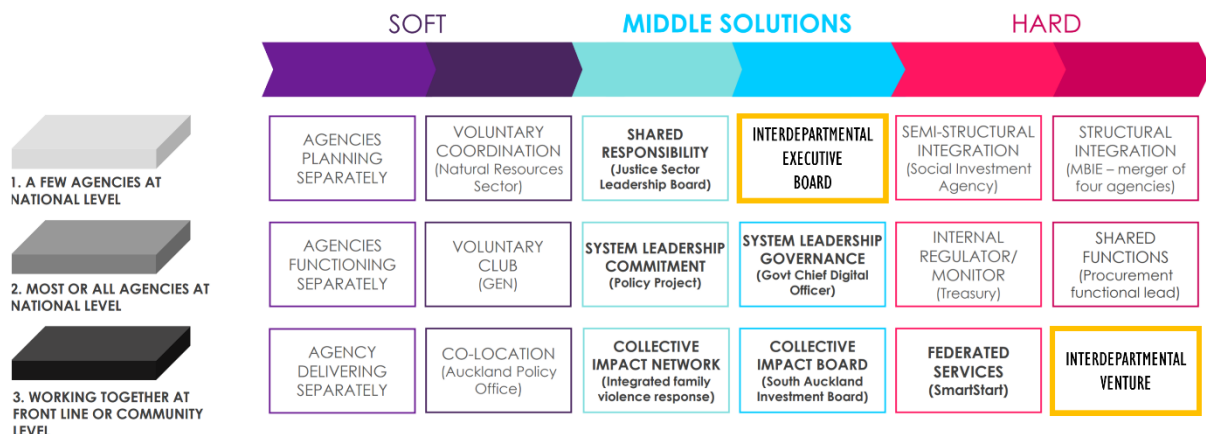
Scott and Boyd (2016, 2020, 2022) and Scott and Merton (2021) explore the dynamics of collaboration in the New Zealand public service – what makes it easy, what makes it hard, and why does it sometimes succeed even when it’s hard. They broadly described the challenges of collaboration within the theoretical framing of transaction costs – working with others, by consensus, is expensive and slow, and these costs make collaboration more difficult or in some cases impossible. Practices that make collaboration easier do so by reducing these transaction costs. However, this was not a good predictor of collaborative success, with some cases succeeding despite high transaction costs. This was explained through the theory of goal commitment, where some public servants persisted and continued to apply effort and innovation despite the barriers present.

Scott and Merton (2022) document the deeply contingent nature of collaborative practices in New Zealand. They note that ‘softer’ solutions tend to be cheaper, easier to establish, and more flexible. However, because of the strength of vertical accountability in the New Zealand system, soft solutions were not adequate for solving problems that required deep trade-offs against individual agency priorities – when individual agency and collaborative goals came into conflict, individual agency goals tended to prevail. In these situations, harder solutions were needed to more formally share accountability. They also reported different solutions were implemented in response to policy, functional, and front-line problems.

Models used by the New Zealand Government

The New Zealand government uses a wide variety of interagency models and deploys these to address different problems. The Public Service Commission’s [Toolkit for Shared Problems](#) (2017) is one of the first explicitly contingent operation frameworks for aligning problem contexts with collaborative solutions. The Toolkit for Shared Problems is arranged as a soft-to-hard continuum (see Figure 1). Joint ventures, broadly defined, occupy the hard, formalised end of this continuum.

Figure 2: Toolkit for shared problems, with new joint venture forms in the Public Service Act 2020 indicated in yellow



The Public Service Act 2020 (Scott et al. 2020, 2022) creates two new interagency models that are broadly analogous to the private sector construct of ‘joint venture’, the [Interdepartmental Venture](#) (analogous to an equity joint venture) and the [Interdepartmental Executive Board](#) (analogous to a non-equity joint venture). Both models describe relationships between departments, that is, between administrative units with the legal Crown. These are analogies because departments are not legally separate organisations, and do not own resources but instead manage resources on behalf of the Crown.

At the time of writing there were no interdepartmental ventures and two interdepartmental executive boards, the Border Executive Board (servicing department: New Zealand Customs Service) and the Strategic Planning Reform Board (servicing department: Ministry for the Environment).

What can we learn from the private sector?

We were unable to locate any literature on statutory joint ventures between departments within a public service. We can triangulate some inferences through findings from studies on soft collaboration and exploring analogous practices in other settings. There is some literature on public-private partnerships (Trafford and Proctor 2006, Higgins and Huque 2015), and on joint ventures between different jurisdictions (for example, between local authorities, or between sovereign states, see: Feiock et al. 2009, Holum 2016). There is also considerable private sector literature on both equity and non-equity models.

Private sector literature provides five theoretical bases for why joint ventures may be useful: transaction costs (Williamson 1985, Crook et al. 2013), resource base (Wernerfelt 1984, Das and Teng 2000), strategic behaviour (Kogut 1988, Contractor and Lorange 2002), organisational learning (Kogut 1988, Berrell et al. 2002), and real options (Myers 1984, Bowman and Moskowitz 2001). Joint ventures may reduce behavioural uncertainty between partners, allow scarce or inimitable resources to be accessed, and/or support tacit knowledge exchange.

Why private sector joint ventures succeed and fail

A primary factor in the success or failure (and overall performance) of joint ventures is attributed to the organisational and governance form (Comino et al., 2007). Non-equity joint ventures are relatively simple and quick to establish and disestablish, being based on contractual agreements. Equity joint ventures, requiring greater commitment and separate legal form, take longer to establish and have higher exit costs.

However, form is not a silver bullet for resolving the significant challenges and complexities of multi-organisation collaboration (Vitalis and Scott 2015). Nor should the significant challenges of governing a joint venture be underestimated (Bamford and Ernst, 2005). For example, failure rates for equity joint ventures are said to be almost 50% (Inkpen and Ross, 2001), and around 70% for non-equity alliances (Gonzalez, 2001). However, failure rates decline over time, and joint ventures that last for three years or longer tend to be enduring (Park and Russo, 1996).

A significant amount of work needs to be undertaken up front to work through issues between partners, including: goal congruence; organisational motivations for joint venture; different decision-making philosophies/cultures between partner organisations; power asymmetry; and competitive rewards. These factors all point to the fact that establishing and running equity joint ventures involve high set up costs associated with careful negotiation and planning (Peace 1997). Interpersonal factors, such as trust, honesty and mutual commitment remain vitally important to joint venture performance and success whether for equity or non-equity joint venture forms (Beamish and Lupton 2009). Many of these findings are similar to those encountered in the establishment of collaborative arrangements in the public sector.

Translating private sector insights into public sector practices

Joint ventures in the private sector are fraught (with high failure rates), and potentially costly (with high costs of entry and exit). Nonetheless, they remain a common organisational form in the private sector for addressing a range of problems. There are potential implications or analogous dynamics within the public service. Similarly, there are limitations to the analogy that are important.

The theories above suggest that a shared ownership stake is important for commitment and stability. While public services do not own resources (they manage resources on behalf of the Crown), a credible commitment to shared funding, staff and/or assets is the closest equivalent. Here the management of entry and exit costs is likely to be important. In particular, equity joint ventures and their public sector analog (interdepartmental ventures), are likely to be relatively expensive to establish. Setting up joint ventures involves some direct cost, but also significant time commitment of ministers and senior public servants, that potentially distracts from the task at hand and other tasks. New organisational forms take time to form as a team, develop internal processes, and ultimately to perform. This suggests that they should be used sparingly, only when other less-costly approaches would be less effective.

Similarly, there are exit costs in disestablishing a joint venture. These entry and exit costs are more significant, as a proportion of the total budget, when joint ventures are short-lived. This suggests joint ventures are more appropriate when settings are likely to be relatively stable over a relatively long period of time, though this cannot be quantified based on existing evidence. These exit costs also act as a potential commitment device – collaborative initiatives come and go, but some problems are likely best addressed through sustained effort. High exit costs may cause joint ventures to be more stable over time.

Credible commitment to shared resources is also likely to support tacit knowledge transfer and access to specialised capability. Such arrangements are likely to be preferred where there are high levels of behavioural uncertainty (as with interdepartmental work focusing on ‘wicked issues’ – Head, 2008) and moderate levels of asset specificity (for example, departmental client data and analytics). Joint venture approaches could also provide a way to more easily share strategic resources (for example data/information assets) and while allowing access to valuable knowledge and capabilities that a partner couldn’t make or buy themselves (such as specialist departmental expertise). Specialist expertise may be a more salient concern in a small jurisdiction like New Zealand, where there may not be alternative sources for certain critical skills.

The literature also suggests that trust and mutual understanding between partners, in this case between Ministers and chief executives and departmental staff, will be critically important. The quality of existing relationships will be even more important in the public service as partner choice is limited. Further, most equity joint ventures (and therefore the analogous interdepartmental ventures) are between two partners and there are likely to be limits to the number of departments that can effectively share assets/resources in a manner that mimics the incentives of equity ownership. However, non-equity joint ventures (and therefore the analogous interdepartmental executive board) may be stable with two-to-eight members.

The dynamics of ministers and Cabinet government are likely to provide an important point of distinction between private and public analogues. One key innovation of both the interdepartmental venture and executive board is the requirement for a single responsible minister. This has no direct private sector equivalent, and because international literature aims to be generalisable, ministers tend to be underrepresented in soft-collaboration literature as well. The relationship between chief executives and this responsible minister, and perhaps more importantly, between the responsible minister and other ministers, is likely to be critical. Whether joint ventures are able to make progress on problems will be influenced by the political capital that leaders can invest in elevating the relative priority of the problems addressed.

Finally, public managers will need to be deliberate in clearly identifying the value to be created and ensure a significant level of agreement and goal congruence between partner departments. This will support identification of important resource and capability interdependences (i.e. the resources and assets that will need to be brought together and shared) for the achievement of joint goals.

The challenge ahead

Interagency collaboration is difficult to get right – in New Zealand and elsewhere, soft/informal and hard/formal models alike. An emerging trend in collaboration literature is toward a more contingent approach. Findings that are generalised across a broad range of contexts tend to be anodyne and insufficient. Instead, context matters, and should inform the way we try to solve different approaches.

Formal joint ventures are unproven in this context. They are unlikely to be the solution to all, or even most, cross-cutting problems, and softer solutions are cheaper and more flexible. However, some problems have proven intractable despite decades of cyclical attention. Joint ventures may offer advantages, in formal shared accountability (to a single responsible minister), and in sharing scarce resources. Their formal structure may limit their flexibility, but the same features may provide stability and sustainability over time. The evidence either way is limited, and drawn by analogy.

As with any social system, formal collaboration (like a joint venture) is also likely to depend on behavioural and interpersonal elements, but these have not yet been mapped and evaluated. General lessons for collaboration are generally drawn from case studies on soft and informal collaboration.

Several New Zealand studies, in particular, highlight the soft skills and behaviours that are needed to make soft collaboration work. Once again, we are left with analogous practices.

The New Zealand public sector must therefore contend with a series of nested problems:

- Which model for working across agency boundaries is most appropriate in each context (and by extension, when should joint ventures be used)?
- How should these models be designed to give the best chance of success?
- What behavioural or soft skills help make these models work?

New Zealand is trying something new to solve problems that haven't been resolved using other means. We should expect that the solutions are difficult to get right, and will involve hard-earned lessons along the way.

For further reading, see: *Contingent Collaboration: When to use which models for joined-up government* (Cambridge University Press 2022) by Rodney Scott and Eleanor Merton.

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