

New ways of collaborating for improved catchment outcomes

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Key Points

- The Moonee Ponds Catchment Collaboration is an excellent example of working together for catchment and waterway management outcomes
- The underpinning approach and principles are transferable to other catchments
- The collaboration group was established as a pilot and is now continuing to operate

Abstract

Collaboration is a concept that is often talked about but one that can be hard to realise in a meaningful way. In the Moonee Ponds Catchment in Melbourne, 17 stakeholders have shown what positive collaboration can look like – working together for improved catchment outcomes.

The initiative began as a pilot project in collaborative governance, led by Melbourne Water. The collaboration is based on the principles:

- Focus on strengths, abilities and energy of stakeholders to find enduring solutions to challenging problems
- Encourage conversations to share an understanding of all perspectives, to learn together and to build respect and trust between stakeholders
- Share knowledge and work together to co-create new ideas and solutions that are informed and sustainable.

The Moonee Ponds catchment is a major tributary of the Yarra River in Melbourne, Victoria. Originally a chain of ponds draining into a West Melbourne swamp, it was subsequently realigned and created as a drainage channel that joins the Yarra River at the Docklands, on the edge of Melbourne's CBD. Many different agencies have management responsibilities for different aspects of the creek environment, and they are challenged by the surrounding land use, which encroaches on the creek, with rail, road, industry and residential blocks adjacent to the channel. In some places however there are significant areas of open space. Although there are poor environmental conditions in large reaches of the stream, there are still many plants and animals that call the creek home, and it remains an important habitat corridor.

The 17 organisations involved in the pilot initiative recognised that no single group could achieve the range of outcomes wanted for the catchment, and therefore that collaboration would be the only way forward in such a complex environment. The collaboration group has selected a suite of strategic actions, or solutions, to start collaborating on. The actions are low cost to implement and are suited to participation by all rather than localised to sites or topics that would have excluded particular stakeholders.

The relationships that developed and the positive experience of those involved in the pilot resulted in the group formalising and continuing to operate after completion of the 12 month pilot period.

Keywords

Catchment, collaboration, waterways, stakeholders, Moonee Ponds

1 Introduction

The Moonee Ponds Creek is an urban waterway in the north of Melbourne and is a tributary of the Yarra River. The catchment consists of both natural and constructed waterways, as well as underground drains and a large retarding basin. A highly engineered approach to flood management has significantly influenced the nature and character of the lower reaches of the creek. In inner Melbourne there are elevated sections of freeway, levee banks, and an adjacent rail line that impact on the amenity, character, biodiversity values and functionality of the watercourse.

A variety of projects and plans for enhancing the creek have been developed over the last 30 years, however implementation of actions written in the plans has been limited. Nevertheless, community and local government interest in improvement of the catchment and creek has been sustained, and in 2016 local government stakeholders asked Melbourne Water to take the lead in resolving some of the issues in the catchment.

Whilst four local government municipalities have responsibilities for local drainage and open space management in the catchment, Melbourne Water is responsible for healthy waterways, integrated drainage and flood management services and creating cooler greener spaces, across greater Melbourne.

Melbourne Water undertook a pilot of catchment governance - a new coordinated approach to identifying and implementing solutions for the catchment. The City of Melbourne provided a staff member through secondment to Melbourne Water to undertake this initiative. Specialist consultants in collaborative governance were brought on board to support the process of collaboration and to build the capacity of Melbourne Water and others to undertake meaningful collaboration.

A first meeting of stakeholders was held in February 2017, where 15 organisations committed to collaborating. For some stakeholders this was a new process, for others it was a continuation of partnerships that they had already been cultivating.

Throughout 2017 the group expanded to include 17 collaborators, and 10 supporting partners. These include state and local government agencies, roads and water authorities, community groups and not-for-profits, businesses and academics. Together the collaborators:

- developed a shared “dilemma statement” – articulating why they were collaborating
- developed a process for working together
- identified three priority coordination projects to work together on and a longer list of projects to advocate for
- built stronger relationships and understanding of each others’ perspectives, leading to a number of actions such as building new access points to the creek, maintenance at problem sites, co-branding a master plan, joined-up submissions to planning processes.

2 A collaborative approach

2.1 What is collaboration?

Collaboration has been defined as a long-term multi-stakeholder commitment in which members recognise the need to look beyond their own organisation and share power, risk and reward (Farrelly 2016). Collaboration has also been described as the pooling of tangible resources, such as information, money and labour, by two or more stakeholders to solve a set of problems which neither can solve individually (Whelan & Oliver 2013).

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2.2 When to use collaboration?

Collaboration is well suited to complex situations. Many issues are so multi-faceted that one organisation is unlikely to have all the knowledge required to create and implement solutions. Collaboration is an appropriate response when facing a complex scenario with no clear answer, where new perspectives on the system are required.

Twyford et al. (2012) suggest that collaboration is the only way to make progress in a complex context; one where it is not possible to predict the outcomes of any given intervention. In this case, collaboration can help to bring together many different types of knowledge from varied individuals that can shed light on new and innovative ways to solve the problem at hand.

Snowden and Boone (2007) suggest that leaders must recognise that a complex domain requires a more experimental mode of management; or they will become impatient when they don't seem to be achieving the results they were aiming for. Collaboration on a complex problem needs time; collaborators need to establish a method of working together that is experimental, and allows for a path forward to emerge.

2.3 Developing a collaborative mind set

Collaboration, as discussed in this paper, is about both a collaborative process with stakeholders, and also a collaborative mindset. Key points that Melbourne Water adhered to for the Moonee Ponds Catchment Collaboration included:

- As a caretaker of community assets Melbourne Water needs to determine collective objectives for waterways
- Stakeholders have the vision and capacity to develop solutions to complex catchment challenges
- Flexible interventions are needed in complex situations, and experimental approaches are required where the solution cannot be known
- Innovation requires diverse perspectives to create solutions that endure – even though the process may be messy and unpredictable
- Commitment to work differently rather than to keep to the status quo is required
- Melbourne Water will take responsibility for the problem solving process, but will not determine and control a particular outcome. The commitment, energy, and action for implementation will only come from joint ownership of the solutions and a determination to see them put into practice.

2.4 How is collaboration different to traditional stakeholder engagement?

A commonly understood concept of collaboration is that it is simply a process, not a new way of thinking and working. A process-only view of collaboration is a more traditional approach that allows an organisation to define the problem and the solution as they see it, and then ask for input to make decisions about that solution. The organisation may well be undertaking a greater degree of engagement and interaction than a simple 'informing' style of communication, but it is still only working with stakeholders within its own pre-determined parameters. Such a process does not embody the ideas held in the 'collaborative mindset' outlined earlier.

Conventional engagement practices are used by agencies to come to a decision and communicate information about a pre-defined problem or project, usually over a relatively short timeframe. Traditionally, once the specific problem is solved or task is completed, stakeholders and the agency 'go their separate ways'. Such an approach is suitable for relatively straightforward problems, but is not appropriate in a complex scenario, where a longer term view to working with others is needed. In a true collaboration members must be closely linked and connected in their activities, to achieve genuine interdependence (Farrelly 2016).

3 Collaboration in the Moonee Ponds catchment

3.1 Determining that collaboration was appropriate

A collaborative approach was considered appropriate in the Moonee Ponds catchment because of:

- the vast number of stakeholders with a passion to develop solutions
- advocacy from within local government, and an understanding that they wanted to be involved in catchment improvement, but desired a leader that had jurisdiction at the catchment scale
- the complexity of the catchment

Management of the Moonee Ponds Creek (and many other urban catchments) can be considered complex because:

- multiple land and water managers are involved
- competing priorities and different perspectives exist on the functions that the creek should perform
- the landscape around the creek is changing; the situation is evolving through time (e.g. urban densification, construction of new and expanded road and rail infrastructure, growing rates of homelessness, increasingly fragmented landscapes for urban biodiversity)
- issues are interconnected which means that changing one part of the system will have impacts on the whole system

This complexity is played out in the history of plans created for the Moonee Ponds Creek. Stakeholders have shown that they can identify creative ideas for improvement of the catchment, however the more ambitious solutions have not been implemented. Often, the development of plans indicates a traditional command-and-control management style— a style not suited to complex contexts (Snowden and Boone 2007). So in 2017 it was determined that rather than try and develop a management plan (business as usual approach), it was deemed more appropriate to take a collaborative and experimental approach that allowed solutions to evolve over time once the perspectives of the many stakeholders involved were understood. It was anticipated that by building capacity in collaboration, stakeholders would be better able to implement actions listed in plans that were already in existence or under development. The decision to undertake a collaborative governance pilot project was supported by Melbourne Water's current focus on more innovative approaches to working with customers. This was a crucial foundation for the initiative.

The objectives of the initiative were to:

- Pilot a new approach to catchment governance
- Establish a collaborative governance group in the Moonee Ponds catchment with key stakeholders
- Leverage investment in the Moonee Ponds catchment

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3.2 The process of collaboration

The process that Melbourne Water used for establishing the collaboration was based on one outlined by Twyford et al. (2012) and started with four stages, implemented through a series of workshops, to:

- Explain collaboration and invite people to commit to it
- Co-define the dilemma statement – the reason for collaborating
- Co-design the process – determine the frequency and length and style of meetings, and the ways to communicate between meetings and with others
- Co-create solutions – identify actions to address the dilemma

These four stages were achieved by organisations working together from February to September 2017. In September 2017 the group moved into a fifth, ongoing, stage:

- Co-deliver actions – three working groups were formed around three priority issues

As noted earlier, 17 organisations committed to collaboration. The dilemma statement that the group identified was:

How do we transform the creek into an iconic waterway for Melbourne, with high socio-ecological benefits for the community, given the diversity of interests amongst stakeholders?

The process that the group designed was a series of workshops and site visits, to be held when deemed appropriate rather than pre-scheduled. An online tool was used for communication between meetings. In the first year there were 9 workshops and 8 site visits held.

3.3 Issues in the catchment

One of the first steps with the group was to identify current issues and people's aspirations for the catchment. These were many and varied but could be broadly grouped as:

Physical issues – environment and infrastructure:

- Day-lighting and naturalising the creek where possible to connect people and nature within the system
- Vegetation connectivity (public and private)
- Preserve and enhance remnant vegetation along the waterway
- Water quality
- Improve habitat value and biodiversity
- Litter
- Contamination
- Erosion
- Managing pest plants and animals
- Urban renewal areas – planning, development, built form guides
- Expansion of major roads or freeways adjacent to and above the creek
- Development of new underground rail close to the creek
- Replacement of bridges

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Social issues:

- Public access to the creek banks
- Quality of creek paths
- Indigenous and post-European settlement cultural and physical heritage
- People connecting with nature
- Artwork and creation of destinations
- Loss of sense of being beside a waterway due to levee banks
- Public open space/green space
- Ensuring the safety of rough sleepers
- Attractive and safe environment – graffiti, amenity, liveability

Drainage and flooding issues:

- Water sensitive urban design – improve the creek’s health
- Moonee Ponds creek as critical blue/green infrastructure
- Removing / modifying concrete from channels
- Being cognisant of creek’s role as a floodway
- Managing water flows upstream/within the catchment
- Exploiting the presence of water in the landscape to reinforce the “waterside” identity of North Melbourne and Kensington
- Safety
- Protection of assets

Management and coordination issues:

- Lack of coordination and plans – e.g. groups have defined geographic interests
- Limited funding and resource allocation
- Characteristics of the catchment – e.g. large spatial area; varying land uses
- Conflict over specific policies - e.g. urban development of the catchment - exacerbating downstream flooding

3.4 Priority actions for collaborators

The three solutions that were prioritised in September 2017 were to:

- Strengthen planning controls for the catchment
- Develop a centralised database for research and information on the catchment
- Formalise the collaboration group

The solutions are actions that all members could participate in and were low cost to implement and able to be commenced immediately. The chosen actions are designed to ensure coordination across the catchment and allow for ongoing collaboration, rather than focussing on implementation of place-specific projects.

The process of selecting these actions included brainstorming a range of possible actions that could benefit the catchment. Interestingly, whilst there was significant appeal in ideas around major capital investment works on the creek, the group did not prioritise these as something for their collaboration efforts in the short

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term. Rather it was determined that delivery of a significant capital project would realistically only involve probably 4-6 stakeholders in a meaningful way, and there was a keen realisation of wanting to act now, not wait for funds from an yet to be identified source.

There has been no expectation from stakeholders that Melbourne Water, as the lead agency, should pay for works deemed as important by the collaboration group. Rather there has been a willingness to work together with many organisations to advocate for funding through appropriate forums.

Working groups were created for the three priority topics, and each group identified hypotheses of how their work will contribute to solving the group's dilemma. This encourages the emergent and flexible approach – trying three actions to move towards an agreed vision (solving the dilemma), and checking back to see if the actions are helping or not, and modifying as needs be. More actions will be added over time.

The group is also advocating for some of the other ideas that were brainstormed as possible actions for the catchment. This includes concrete channel removal, addition of bridges, daylighting of underground drains, improving shared path access, and projects around art, biodiversity, litter and connecting people to the creek. These project ideas have been collated and have been advocated for in a number of state government planning processes that group members have been part of.

3.5 Outcomes generated

A number of 'spin-off' successes have arisen from the collaborators working together over the course of the year, including:

- Impetus for Moreland City Council to become joint owners, with Moonee Valley Council, of a masterplan for the creek in the central part of the catchment – this enables the final product to be co-branded and co-delivered by two councils, either side of the creek
- A three-council investigation into stormwater harvesting opportunities in the lower half of the catchment
- The prevention of the loss of a parcel of land to development, through highlighting the value of the creek corridor and its retention as accessible space
- Scoping and funding of revegetation projects between various collaborators
- New and improved pedestrian access to parts of the creek bank, and also, for one site, a student investigation into further potential pedestrian access points
- Melbourne Water supporting a local Council with a submission to the planning panel review process, regarding a large development by the creek
- Coordinated responses by several collaborators to a major infrastructure proposal, resulting in a recommendation from the Minister for Planning that the collaboration group be involved formally in development of the open space projects proposed in the project
- Responses to locally identified issues around vegetation management, litter, and site maintenance

3.6 Learnings

Evaluation interviews were conducted with participants and these showed that people:

- Gained new insights into the process of collaboration
- Found the process enjoyable and worthwhile
- Felt that they had ample opportunity to contribute and that their voices were heard
- Believed the process was likely to lead to positive catchment outcomes

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Positive changes have been observed in relationships amongst the group and this has contributed to people finding the process enjoyable and worthwhile. The informal site visits have helped people to get to know each other even more so than simply participating in workshops together.

The reported sense of 'being heard and being able to contribute' has been helped by small group work in meetings, and the focus on understanding each other first, rather than jumping straight to solutions. It has also meant there have not been any major conflict situations in the group. It is important to balance the time taken to getting to understand people's perspectives and building relationships: Some people have strong existing relationships and want to move quickly to solutions, whereas others benefit from spending time on relationships first. The group's facilitator or coordinator needs to assess this on a case by case basis.

The pilot initiative enabled Melbourne Water to identify shared projects to work on, and these would not have been anticipated if acting alone. Now Melbourne Water can be proactive on coordination activities with our stakeholders, including helping the group to formalise and develop a brand; work to influence the planning system; and help create a portal to better share information.

The pilot showed the breadth of interest in collaboration. Before commencing it was anticipated that at least 6 organisations would be involved. The high number of collaborators meant that the project took longer than first planned for (the pilot timeline was extended) and helped ensure that a strong network was created, cultivating many new relationships. At the beginning it was unknown whether the stakeholder groups who were traditionally combative would work with Melbourne Water or each other. The pilot has demonstrated that stakeholders are working together far more productively than in some other forums, and now the stakeholders have allies – many organisations can advocate on the same topics, reinforcing each others' messages.

An important reflection is that this collaboration was enabled because there was an attitude within Melbourne Water that the organisation could experiment with something different. The initiative was not given detailed milestones and timelines before the collaboration began. It was given the space to emerge and respond to the interests of the collaborators. It was not run with a particular solution in mind, but with an openness and willingness to learn with others. This culture is not yet pervasive across the whole business, but it was accepted by senior management and it empowered staff to try something new. It is imperative that any organisation attempting to lead a collaboration has senior management who are supportive of a collaborative approach.

Before commencing a collaborative initiative, it is important to recognise that time and patience are required, and the person leading the collaboration must be supported to work in a collaborative and experimental manner, different to business-as-usual. Key lessons for people charged with leading a collaborative group:

- Allow time for building relationships and understanding others' perspectives
- It takes time for people to get to know each other and agree on what the priorities are. This cannot be rushed, - if pushed too quickly it is possible that group members won't have the buy-in to the process and therefore the outcomes that the group works towards. This lack of buy-in can lead to strategic plans and other documents that contain lists of actions that are never fully implemented.
- To do collaboration well a collaboration leader (and the lead organisation more broadly) must be willing to participate in an emergent process which will begin without clear milestones and only a big picture goal to strive towards; the solutions will become clearer over time
- People involved in collaboration must be willing to think differently and learn with others about how to 'do' collaboration – the process itself builds capacity to collaborate, there is an ongoing learning and adjustment to process.

3.7 Moving forward - formalising the collaboration

A 'memorandum of understanding' has been drafted to formalise the commitment of partners as the group moves forward. Elements from this document (shown below) could be relevant to others considering a collaboration:

The collaboration group members are committed to cooperating across the catchment for the purpose of attaining a whole-of-catchment approach.

Specifically, the members will:

- *Be transparent in all interactions*
- *Be considerate of each organisation's respective circumstances, including but not limited to community interests, commercial imperatives and strategic contexts, and to "speak with one voice" where possible*
- *Collaborate to identify priorities and innovative projects with a best-for-regional catchment environmental and community benefit*
- *Bring an 'appreciative' mindset to collaboration, focusing on strengths, abilities and energy of stakeholders to find enduring solutions to challenging problems*
- *Share an understanding of all perspectives, to learn together and to build respect and trust between stakeholders*
- *Share knowledge and work together to co-create new ideas and solutions that are informed, sustainable and enduring*

A number of the collaboration group partners have committed funding to engage a coordinator following the completion of the pilot phase of the project. The group has identified that the collaboration coordinator role will include:

- Supporting the group to continue to work together, facilitating meetings and relationship building
- Helping to keep people and organisations accountable for actions they commit to
- Developing a brand and building reputation of the group
- Identifying new members and facilitating their introduction
- Helping group members in seeking funding opportunities and leveraging investments across boundaries – liaising with other stakeholders
- Collating and managing key documents and records

4. Benefits of collaboration

Melbourne Water has found the process of working collaboratively with stakeholders to be very beneficial. Relationships with and between the stakeholders involved are considerably stronger, enabling easy and fast communications when needed between groups. Melbourne Water now has a comprehensive understanding of the priorities of stakeholders in the Moonee Ponds catchment.

At the same time as the Moonee Ponds Collaboration pilot, Melbourne Water also undertook a pilot of a variation of this approach in the development of a waterways strategy. Through both of these initiatives Melbourne Water has found that collaborative approaches lead to:

- Development of innovative solutions and ideas
- Partners owning and implementing solutions
- Stronger relationships with partners - creating allies and advocates in the catchment
- Ability to operate proactively rather than reactively
- Opportunity to be perceived as open and easy to deal with
- Coordination with stakeholders for catchment outcomes
- Understanding our partners and what they are trying to achieve

As such, Melbourne Water will explore opportunities to continue with collaborative approaches for tackling complex issues in other waterways and catchments in greater Melbourne.

5. Conclusions

In complex situations where there are no clear answers, the process of collaboration can be used to create better relationships, develop a shared vision, and to identify innovative solutions. This approach can be more effective in generating positive catchment outcomes, than an approach that focuses on expertise within an organisation – and creating a plan that focuses within organisational boundaries only.

The Moonee Ponds Collaboration serves as a good example for individuals and organisations wanting to use new ways of collaborating for improved catchment outcomes. The principles and process underpinning it are transferable.

The Moonee Ponds collaborators are now moving forward with their identified actions and are advocating with one voice for the catchment, which will leverage further interest and investment in the catchment over time.

Anyone wishing to commit to a similar collaborative process needs to ensure:

- Time is set aside for building relationships and understanding others' perspectives
- Willingness to participate in an emergent process which will begin without clear milestones and only a big picture goal to strive towards (this willingness is needed at both an organisation and individual level, and is particularly relevant at the organisation-level in the lead agency)
- Capacity to think differently and learn with others about how to 'do' collaboration – the process itself builds capacity to collaborate, there is an ongoing learning and adjustment to process.

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