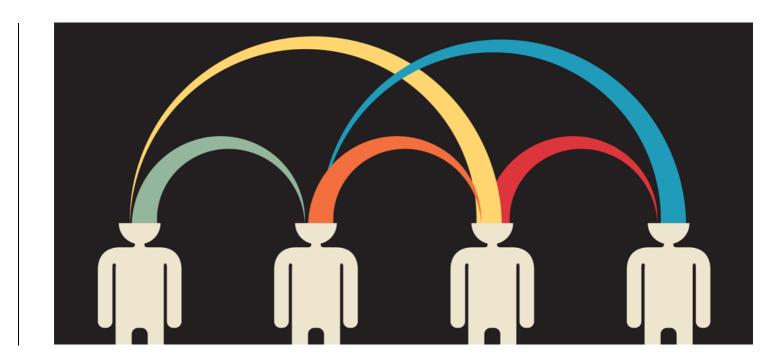# COUNCIL COLLAB.

Creating a collaborative and co-ordinated local government sector

Emerging Leaders 2019- Group 2

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the opportunity to make one major improvement in local government in the next 5 years by creating a more collaborative sector that shares information through the development of an online information sharing portal called "Council Collab". This would create efficiencies and a more cohesive and consistent sector.

In South Australia there are 68 Councils, each with notable differences in organisational structures, level of education held by individuals and the level of skills and experience possessed by staff. Councils currently address a lack of skills and knowledge by either outsourcing work, undertaking work with limited expertise, or not attempting the work if the risk is considered too high. The opportunity that we have identified seeks to build relationships by connecting staff across councils in order to share information. An online system that connects people is a way to increase cross council collaboration, increase efficiencies and close the skills gaps through a centralised system.

In order to ascertain the current situation and support for the proposal, an engagement plan was implemented. The purpose of the engagement was to ascertain whether there is a need to improve information sharing between councils, gauge support and identify current skills gaps and issues.

Through the engagement process, there was overwhelming support for an online portal with 78% of participants saying they would use a centralised online portal to access information if one was available. It was also identified that 76% had been in a situation where they needed information or assistance and could not source it from within their own council. Furthermore, 49% identified a current skills gap within their council where they would likely need to seek information from another council. The engagement process identified common themes; there are current skills gaps, people would use an online portal if there was one, people do need to seek information from other councils and people do not have established networks regardless of length of tenure.

Opportunities for the portal were identified such as broadening networks, accessing a current contact list, topic indexing and information sharing. Some of the challenges identified were management of the portal, funding, accessibility, functionality and confidentiality. Recommendations moving forward are to establish a cross-council working group to discuss the opportunity and workshop ideas. Further research is required to identify potential prototype portals and seek input from specialists in this area.

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INTRODUCTION

Working in local government comes with significant opportunities but also challenges. Hundreds of different professions are employed across a broad spectrum ranging from librarians, project officers, arborists and asset managers to name a few. Networks are usually created by employees within their own organisations or their own sector and these networks are used for the purpose of information sharing. However, there can be times when information cannot be sourced from within your own organisation or your own established networks. Finding information or the right person to talk to when help is required from other councils can be challenging.

This report investigates the need and opportunity to improve collaboration and information sharing throughout councils. The local government sector can therefore work together as a coordinated connected group.

Local government employees were surveyed through an engagement tool to ascertain the demand for an online portal that could assist with connecting people in order to promote information sharing. There was overwhelming support for on online portal. The portal would facilitate collaboration across councils; it is therefore aptly named 'Council Collab'.

A system that connects people and facilitates collaboration and relationship building across all sectors within council would facilitate information exchange; in simple terms an employee would know who to talk to when help or information is required. By establishing better connections and facilitating contact with peers, individual councils could reduce duplication, work as a coordinated group and stop reinventing the wheel.

By connecting people, we can achieve a more cohesive and consistent sector.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

INFORMATION SHARING AT A COMMONWEALTH LEVEL

In 2007, the Commonwealth Government commissioned a review to facilitate information sharing across government jurisdictions. The National Government Information Sharing Strategy was implemented (Commonwealth Government, 2008) with an aim to 'manage government information' to ensure 'more efficient and effective use of it' (Commonwealth Government, 2008).

The strategy was superseded by the National Collaboration Framework that set common information sharing principles and identified challenges to information sharing but was ultimately undertaken to facilitate information across commonwealth government (Commonwealth Government, 2015).

INFORMATION SHARING IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

In local government in South Australia, there is no single endorsed set of information sharing principles or systems. There are many information sharing systems such as Council Connect (Department of Planning, Transport and Infrastructure instigated for the Planning Reform) and OnePlace (Public Library Services) but these pertain to specific professional areas of expertise. There is currently no information sharing system that targets connecting professions in local government.

The local government reform currently being undertaken was instigated based on six guiding principles with two of those being:

- Efficiency, and
- Sector consistency (Local Government Association, 2018)

The project group 2 identified, that through enabling the better sharing of information, the local government sector could be more efficient and consistent thus, in part, meeting the guiding principles of the local government reform. Information and skills sharing are areas that the project group sees as a significant opportunity for local government. In order to progress investigations, further local and international examples of collaboration and information sharing were researched.

LOCAL CASE STUDY OF INFORMATION SHARING

Approximately three years ago a new system called "OnePlace" was successfully implemented that saw an integrated online system for the Public Library Services (PLS) in South Australia. PLS is the central support agency for all South Australian public libraries and has been in existence for over 30 years. The PLS manages the online system for all 133 public libraries across South Australia.

The primary purpose of OnePlace is for communication including a Council staff intranet page, facilitating the sharing of information, ability to join in a discussion, post to a network email list (there are several different email lists), find contact information and share handbooks. For more information on OnePlace refer to Appendix 2- Interview with Julian Valente, Team Leader ICT Applications- Public Library Services.

INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION SHARING

Progressive organisations are constantly seeking ways of improving collaboration and innovation as they acknowledge that an engaged workforce equals engaged customers. Organisations also acknowledge that the use of technology is important in this endeavour. Whether it be a recruitment portal like Seek, online food delivery chain Deliveroo, the BBC, RMIT (university) or Intuit to name a few, all these organisations are using an online information sharing system called "Slack" (Slack n.d #1).

Intuit is a technology company with global products and platforms with more than 9,000 employees and over 50 million customers worldwide. They identified an opportunity to improve efficiencies and break down silos. The business silos were broken with the introduction of 'slack-based' project collaboration via an internal initiative called "Work Better Together". This enabled better knowledge sharing and overall has improved customers service. (Slack n.d #2).

International company Xero is a worldwide leader in cloud-based accounting software, has a presence in over 180 countries and has also adopted 'slack' for cross-functional collaboration. This tool is used by all teams within Xero. More than 2,300 active users upload over 1,200 files, utilise 600 apps and send more than 58,000 messages daily. This has revolutionised the way teams communicate within the company and overall led to be a better customer experience for Xero's 1.6 million subscribers (Slack, n.d #3).

APPROACH

The overarching purpose of the engagement was to identify the need for an online information sharing system. In addition, it sought to understand the scale of the skills gaps and gain an appreciation of the opportunities and challenges with the proposal.

The objectives of the engagement were to:

- Provide information about the online proposal
- Determine whether there is a need for an online sharing system
- Identify the current skills gaps
- Provide an open and transparent engagement process
- Ensure engagement techniques used were easy to understand and easy to use
- Seek feedback on the proposal

Stakeholders consisted of council staff across multiple councils, a variety of roles and levels and included both metropolitan and rural. We first sought feedback directly from team leaders, managers and CEO's which assisted in developing the survey questions to be used for wider engagement. We developed an online website that housed information about the proposal, contact details, frequently asked questions, consultation dates and two feedback tools to gather participant feedback; a 'Survey' and 'Your Ideas'. Survey questions were carefully thought out, ensuring the survey wasn't too long (11 questions in total), questions aligned with our engagement objectives and gave enough information for the project team to consider if the proposal should proceed to the next stage.

OUTCOMES

Participation was high with the online website receiving 120 visits, and 73 people completed the survey. Overall, 11 councils provided feedback and we learned that regardless of how long participants have worked in local government, over 75% had found themselves in a situation where they required assistance but couldn't find help within their own council. Support for the online portal was high with 78% of participants saying they would use an online portal if there was one and 89% value information sharing across councils. Whilst only 49% of participants were aware of a skills gap within their council, an overwhelming 40 specific skills/roles gaps were identified.

The skills gaps covered a broad range of roles of all levels and skillsets. Many commented that there was no dedicated role in their council for these areas and often a consultant is sourced at a high cost. Participants were also asked if they would be happy to contribute to the online portal and assist others. Interestingly, many of the skills participants were happy to assist with, were skills that were identified as gaps by others. The survey also provided free text fields for suggestions and challenges and many comments were made. After analysing the data common themes became present.

Suggestions in order of most commented on:
- Contact details of individuals (including email and phone number)
- Specialist areas (skills) of staff divided by profession
- Knowledge sharing including history of past information shared
- Sharing of communications including templates, information guides, FAQs and policies
- Information collated according to subject topics

Challenges in order of most commented on:
- Managing the portal (who, how, keeping it updated)
- Accessibility and functionality
- Resourcing (time/workload impacts)
- Legal/reputational implications
- Confidentiality
- No third-party involvement
- Others taking credit for work

The common theme throughout the survey was becoming clearer; there is a need to seek information from other councils; regardless of time served people need to find information from other councils; many of those that do need to seek information do not have the networks to know who to ask. Full survey results can be found in Attachment 1 - Engagement survey graphs and Attachment 2 - Engagement Survey comments.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The online information sharing portal 'Council Collab.' would improve information sharing opportunities between councils.

As a group we discussed the benefits to local government if this proposal was to proceed and include but are not limited to the following:

- Innovation & development
- Collective collaboration
- Direct feedback
- All in participation with no restraints
- Get it right the first time
- Improved practices and procedures
- Support to new employees
- Improved internal procedures
- Reduce skills gaps
- Supported services and opinions
- Greater transparency

Whilst there are significant benefits there are also challenges including the following:

- Resource impacts
- Once the information is out there it cannot be removed
- Editable documents
- Reluctance to share information
- Inaccurate or out of date resources

By analysing the survey results and through further investigation, considering the opportunities and challenges, we concluded there are significant opportunities to do things better as a collective local government sector. Structured sharing of important information could achieve improved outcomes and better coordinated services.

Based on the positive response and the data analysis, our project team sees the online portal as a great collaboration opportunity and proposes the following recommendations moving forward;

i. Create a cross-council working group

ii. Liaise with the Local Government Association.

iii. Develop and implement a broader engagement across all councils in SA, capturing more detailed feedback and furthermore including external organisations with a direct interest in the operations of councils.

iv. Conduct further research into;

    a. How this project will benefit both local government and the community,

    b. Legal implications into such a system (e.g. considering broader policies on privacy and sharing information as per Councils individual protocols),

    c. Confidentiality issues arising from the sharing of information,

    d. Impacts on resources within Councils (e.g. what are the implications on employee work hours when operating within this system),

    e. The funding and administration of such a project, and

    f. The interest of senior management within each Council and determining whether progression to development stage is warranted.

v. With appropriate resolutions and a positive response by senior management, a preliminary development phase may be possible. This may involve exploration into the viability, design, management and functionality of a prototype system, with specialist input from an IT/Web/Portal designer providing input into this phase. Within this system key fundamentals, stemming from the data analysis should include;

    a. A database of contact details for individuals who specialise in specific fields of local government,

    b. Clearly defined specialist areas that enables direct channels of communication (i.e. queries are not envisaged to burden any organisation or member),

    c. A database of existing information that could benefit other Councils (e.g. templates, information guides, document formats etc), and

    d. A database of historical communication that can be made available should the same topic be raised (i.e. eliminating any un-necessary repeat queries).

Consideration must be given towards how to mitigate or assume risk of one or more elements in a project of this nature. Consultation will play a key role in identifying and managing these possibilities before they manifest themselves, placing at risk the recommendations above.

KEY IMPLEMENTATION RISKS

Risk	Description
Financial	Funding of a project, resourcing both early and future stages should it become reality, ongoing maintenance and financial support through memberships etc.
Reputation	Misinformation and the accuracy of materials and advice on the system may impact users and/or organisations. Credibility may be compromised if documents are not kept up to date. The source of information is only the opinion of individuals and/or organisations and, can only be considered general in nature.
Time	The project may fail in the early stages or have a short life span through disinterest at a later stage. Officers may feel compelled to participate, which could impact on their resource availability within an organisation.
Data Integrity	Risk of information becoming a target to cybercrime, with consideration that the system is a singular site holding user information. External stakeholder exposure may also result from a system of this nature.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE

The timeline below includes aspects of the recommendations that can be tracked from concept phase to project phase, with specific dates for delivery. The timeline table includes proposed activities, responsibilities and eventual outcomes with flexible timelines against each item.

Key Activity	Responsibility	Outcomes	Start	Finish
Review project document and explore options to undertake further research into the concept outlined.	To be determined	Determination of whether it is justified to progress to next stage or shelve the idea.	January 2020	March 2020
Engagement implementation ○ **All Councils** ○ **External organisations e.g. LG Lawyers, LG Professionals SA etc** ○ **Confirmation of costs of membership associated with the system** **Set up a working group**	To be determined	Confirm 'buy in' by all Councils (Senior Management) and justify moving to detailed design phase.	April 2020	June 2020
Justification Hold Point	To be determined	Review feedback from Senior Management and determine if there is justification to progress to next stage.		
Engage website designer (tender/contract) to undertake concept design of system in consultation with working group	To be determined	Using feedback from the engagement a concept design of a system suitable for presentation to stakeholders is developed	July 2020	September 2020
Engagement ○ **All Councils** ○ **External organisations e.g. LG Lawyers, LG Professionals SA etc** **Confirmation of costs of membership associated with the system**	To be determined	Consult on proposed system, seek feedback on concept. Identify current skills gaps. Identify staff willing to offer assistance through the portal.	October 2020	November 2020

Detailed system development	To be determined	Development of the prototype of the information sharing system for use in trial phase.	December 2020	May 2021
Trial Phase	To be determined	Implement a 12-month trial phase with a 'champion group' being primary users (e.g. this could be a specific user group in Council). Feedback to be sought regarding the system benefits/issues/degree of use. Upgrading of system is to be undertaken by website designer as required	June 2021	June 2022
Justification Hold Point	To be determined	Review feedback from 'champion group' (including benefits/disadvantages) and determine if there is justification to progress to next stage.		
Roll out system for information sharing to all Councils	To be determined	Implement system for all Council staff to use with feedback to be sought regarding the system benefits/issues/degree of use. Upgrading of system is to be undertaken by website designer as required.	July 2022	July 2025
Justification Hold Point	To be determined	Review feedback from broader Council Staff (including benefits/disadvantages) and determine if there is justification to progress to next stage.		
Implement Permanent Information Sharing S	To be determined		August 2025	

Meeting scheduling was a priority, considering one member was from a rural council. This member agreed to travel to Adelaide for meetings which made communication easier for the whole group. We collaborated early, with members willing to hear what others had to say. Dividing up tasks was relatively seamless, and members embraced the idea of assisting with areas that were outside their comfort zone. This is a testament to the group that everyone was accepting of each other and created a safe place for all members.

We identified our different skill sets early by referencing our Team Management Systems (TSM) profiles. We identified that we were lacking in two areas of the TMS sectors, Upholder Maintainer and Reporter Adviser Roles and made a conscious decision to 'move into' these sectors to ensure the project was undertaken in a holistic manner. Tasks were broken down into responsibilities that could be done either in pairs or individually. Communication was mainly via email for regular feedback and advice. One member took the lead on organising the group by sending meeting invites and updates.

Whilst we didn't always agree, we compromised or agreed to disagree in a professional manner. We were encouraging and supportive of each other, considered other workloads and external pressures and didn't take feedback personally. We also had many laughs together.

It was a challenge keeping up with the project and other work commitments. We regularly communicated when we were at capacity and when we could take on more. A group member who was skilled in data analysis demonstrated those skills during a meeting and all members assisted with some of this task. It was a valuable learning experience for all.

The peer review of our draft report was invaluable. It highlighted the need for a higher-level perspective of our topic and to clearly articulate the 'why'. As a result, we re-visited our project and incorporated the feedback

It has been a positive experience resulting in high levels of collaboration between group members.

REFERENCE LIST

Commonwealth Government 2008, National Government Information Strategy, Department of Finance, Canberra, viewed 29 October 2019 (site since removed), <https://www.finance.gov.au/publications/national-government-information-sharing-strategy/index.html>

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Local Government Association of South Australia (LGA), 2018, State Election- Delivering Local Government Reform - Circular 9.9, viewed 7 July 2019, <https://www.lga.sa.gov.au/page.aspx?u=6734&c=79558>

Slack n.d #1, Slack helps Cole Haan bring new footwear to market faster, viewed 4 November 2019, viewed, <https://slack.com/intl/en-au/customer-stories>

Slack n.d #2, Connecting teams to support 50 million customers around the world, viewed 6 September 2019, <https://slack.com/intl/en-au/customer-stories/intuit>

Slack n.d #3, Faster problem-solving at Xero, viewed on 6 September 2019, <https://slack.com/intl/en-au/customer-stories/xero>

OnePlace - Interview with Julian Valente, Team Leader ICT Applications- Public Library Services

Who manages OnePlace? – PLS manage OnePlace i.e. the cost, the addition/removal of users/content. Within PLS, a single person from the Applications team supports the software (SharePoint) and each team is responsible for maintaining content relating to their specific areas.

What does it take to run One place? – To run OnePlace, you need a sound understanding of how SharePoint works and must also have regular meetings with content owners, so content is always current.

Who pays for the service? – PLS pays for the service on behalf of the South Australian Library Network How is information kept up to date? Each team within PLS generally has at least one person with skills to update content/documents. We are designing a framework where regular meetings will take place with a member of the PLS Applications support team and the content owners, to keep the content relevant and current.

What do you see as the benefits of this share Point? SharePoint is a very feature rich application, and, with the use of permissions, users can be given various levels of access. You can restrict users to view only, give them the ability to update content or more advanced users the ability to create mini applications within SharePoint. Its versatility means that it can easily be tailored to business needs.

What are its limitations? Some limitations are that it not always easy to share content with people outside your organization. The administration of SharePoint can also be quite complicated, meaning some businesses may need to engage a consultant to customize things, and this can be quire costly.

How many years has it been in place? - It has been in place for about 3 years now. It replaced the former platform, Basecamp, which, as I understand, lacked many of the features of SharePoint.

Emerging Leaders Program – Online Portal Proposal

ONE PLACE, ONE COUNCIL

Have you ever been in a situation where you needed help, but couldn't find the answer and didn't know where to go for that help? Do you have a skills gap within your team, or your council?

Imagine if there was a centralised online portal where you could quickly access staff from any other council within South Australia who could help!

Well, we've got an idea for how to collaborate across councils in South Australia to close these skills gaps and provide information.

We'd love to hear your thoughts and ideas on this proposal. Please help us by spending around 5 minutes to fill in the **Survey** and **Post Your Ideas.**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

As part of the Emerging Leaders Program we have been tasked with coming up with an idea that will benefit council. Our idea is to close the skills gaps and develop an online information portal where staff can help staff regardless of which council you work in. Whilst there are many information sharing platforms, these are usually specific to one area of council. Our aim is to have a centralised portal for all staff to seek assistance in all areas. Or, you might have a special skill that others could benefit from ie: you might speak another language.

Whilst this page has been developed using Onkaparinga Council logo, we are a team made up from various councils and backgrounds.

Through this engagement, we hope to gather feedback from staff across a range of councils to identify any current skills gaps , if staff are willing to help others in another area of expertise and whether the portal is a good idea and should progress further.

HOW TO PROVIDE YOUR FEEDBACK

It's easy to leave feedback. Simply click the 'Take Survey' button or share your ideas using the 'Your Ideas' tab.

We will collate the data and share the outcomes on this page, or take the survey and leave your email address and we'll send any outcomes to you.

TAKE THE SURVEY HERE   **YOUR IDEAS**

Key Dates

Consultation Open
23 September → 01 October 2019

FAQ

When will the portal be live

Who will manage the portal.

Life Cycle

Open
This consultation is Open for contributions.

Under Review
Contributions to this consultation are closed for evaluation and review. The Project team will report back on key outcomes.

Final report
The final outcomes of the consultation are documented here.

Who's listening

Emerging Leaders Project Team

We are a team from various councils and backgrounds

Email paula.bugden@onkaparinga.sa.gov.au