

**FINAL REPORT**

**Exploring Lateral Accountability at a Settlement Services  
Partnership**

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## 1. Introduction

This report provides an account of a study on lateral accountability and the use of lateral accountability mechanisms in the New South Wales Settlement Partnership (NSP). Lateral accountability refers to a construct that partner organisations of the NSP are accountable to one another and to the consortium as a whole.

The NSP is a consortium consisting of a lead organisation, 11 Migrant Resource Centres and 11 other community organisations located around New South Wales (NSW), formed in 2015 to deliver the Settlement Services Program funded by the Australian Government. Its objective is to provide settlement services for migrants, refugees and humanitarian entrants that promote economic and personal well-being, independence and community connectedness.

The NSP is an innovative model for the delivery of settlement services. It builds on the institutional knowledge of each settlement service provider, and, their expertise and understanding of local areas and networks. It is designed to support partner organisations to deliver settlement services across most of NSW and increase their social impact.

At the outset, the lead organisation already had a strong level of collaboration with the 11 Migrant Resource Centres, and the NSP builds on this, applying collaborative practice mechanisms with 11 additional organisations to achieve its objectives. These mechanisms include a communications framework, media and communications protocols and strategy, quarterly meetings of partners, meetings of settlement managers and regional partners, and working groups. Also, the NSP has a Settlement Innovation Fund which provides partners with access to additional funds and opportunities to work together and innovate in providing services.

The funding body has a reporting system Data Exchange (DEX) which captures predominantly quantitative data for the program. The NSP's own reporting mechanism combines qualitative and outcome-oriented reporting with the quantitative data.

This study investigates if and if so how, various accountability mechanisms support the NSP's goals to build on partner organisations' knowledge and expertise, to support each partner and to develop new approaches in delivering settlement services.

At the same time that this study was completed, the NSP produced a separate document "NSW Settlement Partnership In Focus", which provides examples of the partnership's work, including case studies and stories from clients.

### 1.1 Aims

This study has the following aims:

- To identify and describe lateral accountability mechanisms that are being used in the NSP.
- To assess current lateral accountability mechanisms in order to ascertain why certain mechanisms work well and others do not work as well.
- To identify ways to improve current lateral accountability mechanisms.

- To explore perceptions by partners in the NSP on the effectiveness of current lateral accountability mechanisms.
- To describe ways that the lead organisation in the NSP can strengthen lateral accountability arrangements in the NSP.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Upward, Downward and Lateral Accountability

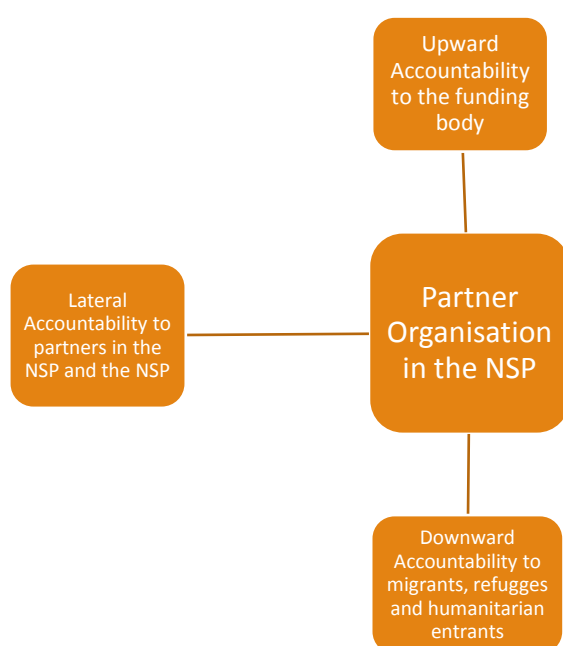
To say that someone should be accountable for particular events or actions is to hold certain expectations about what this person or organisation should be able and obliged to explain, justify and take responsibility for.<sup>1</sup> *Accountability* is:

“the means through which individuals and organizations are held externally to account for their actions and as the means by which they take internal responsibility for continuously shaping and scrutinizing organizational mission, goals, and performance.”<sup>2</sup>

Not-for-profit organisations are accountable to multiple stakeholders. Upward accountability is to stakeholders who hold access to key resources, including funders, donors and regulators, and typically takes the form of external oversight. *Downward accountability* is to clients and beneficiaries, and, is guided by a sense of obligation to a mission. It focuses on how responsive and aware an organisation is to clients or communities whom they seek to assist, and, their openness to involving these stakeholders in assessing the nature and impact of their work.

*Lateral accountability* is accountability to staff, volunteers, and other community agencies with whom a not-for-profit organisation works. There are two forms of lateral accountability: within organisations and between organisations.<sup>3</sup> Lateral accountability between organisations is evident in consortia like the NSP. In this study, lateral accountability refers to a construct that partner organisations of the NSP are accountable to one another and to the consortium as a whole.<sup>4</sup> Thus, an NSP partner organisation will have multiple accountabilities as shown below in Figure 1:

**Figure 1. Upward, Downward and Lateral Accountabilities of Partner Organisations in the NSP**



The NSP is both upwardly accountable to the funding body and downwardly accountable to clients (i.e., migrants, refugees, and humanitarian entrants). An emphasis on upward

accountability by members of the NSP could distract and compromise downward accountability to clients, potentially resulting in mission drift.<sup>5</sup> An unproven claim is that lateral accountability alleviates this tension between upward and downward accountabilities, by aligning and reinforcing partners' objectives, values and performance standards.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.2 Lateral Accountability Mechanisms

The literature on inter-firm collaborations in the private for-profit sector identifies systems, rules, practices, values and other activities to manage inter-organisational activities.<sup>7</sup> *Mechanisms* refer to the specific techniques used by collaborators to exercise control over inter-organisational activities and are typically categorised as formal and social mechanisms. *Formal mechanisms* specify contractual obligations and formal organisational mechanisms to manage collaboration and cooperation.<sup>8</sup> They help to align partners' objectives, clarify mutual expectations, reduce uncertainty and assist in mitigating relational performance risk. They may also prescribe the appropriate behaviour to achieve the desired outcomes.

*Social mechanisms* focus on informal cultures and systems, communication, socialization and self-regulation.<sup>9</sup> They are generally seen as more effective than formal mechanisms in increasing relationship commitment, reducing goal incongruence and establishing a compatible set of values. Social mechanisms humanize the experience of collaboration by encouraging a 'social' process:

"Those who one happens to work with or alongside, become those with whom one shares and builds a common interpretation of one's world of work. Journeys to and from work, lunches and after work drinks ... of organizational life serve as locations for such sense-making talk."<sup>10</sup>

These mechanisms allow individuals to learn what behaviours are acceptable and customary. Notably, there may be limits to the use of social mechanisms in a consortium given the challenge of physical proximity of staff of partner organisations. Hence, partner selection becomes one mechanism by which partners with compatible values and appropriate skills are identified. This helps to minimise the possibility of a poor relationship commitment and goal incongruence among partners. Migrant Resource Centres and other community settlement services as NSP partners are an example of partner organisations which have compatible values and goals.

Importantly, formal mechanisms can offer structural arrangements and discursive spaces for social mechanisms to occur. For example, performance reports produced through formal mechanisms may provide a platform where social forms of communication and discussions take place.

### 3. Research Method

Lateral accountability in the NSP was examined by primarily relying on data from semi-structured interviews of staff from partner organisations. Additional data was obtained through internal documents describing the NSP Communications Framework, Marketing and Communication Strategy, Communication Protocols, Media Protocol, Terms of Reference of the Quarterly Meetings, Settlement Managers' Meetings, Regional Partners' Meetings, Working Groups, the Agenda and Minutes of Quarterly Meetings, the NSP reporting mechanism, and NSP Settlement Innovation Fund.

Table 1 presents particulars of the interview participants and the interviews.

**Table 1. Descriptive Data on Interviewees and Interviews**

| Interviewees            |            | Interviews                                |                      |
|-------------------------|------------|---|----------------------|
|                         |            | Duration                                  |                      |
| Role                    | Number (%) | in Minutes                                | in Hours             |
| Case Worker             | 5 (19%)    | 333                                       | 5.55                 |
| Team Leader             | 3 (11%)    | 218                                       | 3.63                 |
| Manager/Senior Officer  | 13 (48%)   | 1040                                      | 17.33                |
| CEO/Board Member        | 6 (22%)    | 374                                       | 6.24                 |
|                         | <b>27</b>  | <b>1965</b>                               | <b>32.75</b>         |
|                         |            |   |                      |
| Partner Size            |            | Mode                                      | Number of Interviews |
| Large                   | 12 (63%)   | Face-to-face                              | 26 (96%)             |
| Medium                  | 4 (21%)    | Phone                                     | 1 (4%)               |
| Small                   | 3 (16%)    | -   | -                    |
|                         | <b>19</b>  |   | <b>27</b>            |
|                         |            |   |                      |
| Partner Location        |            | Research Team                             | Number of Interviews |
| Metropolitan Sydney     | 15 (79%)   | 2 Researchers present                     | 22 (81%)             |
| Non-Metropolitan Sydney | 4 (21%)    | 1 Researcher (Maria Cadiz Dyball) present | 5 (19%)              |
|                         | <b>19</b>  |   | <b>27</b>            |

There are 27 interviewees, who were in a range of roles, across 19 organisations in the NSP. In terms of roles of interviewees, the highest representation is of staff at Manager/Senior Officer level (48%). In terms of organisation size, the interviewees are from partners of different sizes, with large partners being highly represented (63%). Partner organisation size was based on the classification by the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, which uses annual revenue to categorise organisation size. They were classified as: small organisations (annual revenue of less than \$250,000); medium (between \$250,000 and \$1,000,000); and large organisations (annual revenue exceeding \$1,000,000).<sup>11</sup> The

distribution of partner sizes in the study sample reflects that of the NSP. Of the 19 participating organisations, 15 are located in Metropolitan Sydney.

The average duration of interviews was 1.2 hours. 26 of the 27 interviews were conducted *in situ* and in person, with one interview done by phone. 22 of the interviews had both investigators present while the remaining five were completed by Associate Professor Maria Cadiz Dyball.

Of the 21 (of the NSP total of 23) partners who initially indicated interest in participating in the study, two did not respond to two follow up email requests. One agreed to participate but was only available outside the period dedicated for the semi-structured interviews.

Interviews were digitally-recorded and professionally transcribed. The research team adopted a mixed-method approach in data analysis. The interview transcripts were analysed by Associate Professor Maria Cadiz Dyball using NVivo10, a software that assists to categorise emerging themes. To complement the analysis, Dr. Chen manually coded and analysed the interview transcripts.

This report is based on the dominant themes arising from the semi-structured interviews, which include themes that may be seen tangential to the aims of the study. These themes arose from the free flowing nature of semi-structured interviews. There was an interview guide to systematically ask interviewees about their perceptions of the NSP, their organisation's role therein, their understanding and application of lateral accountability and their suggestions to improve accountability in the NSP. However, the interviewees were encouraged to spontaneously respond to the prompt questions and to elaborate on their responses and reflections. All interviewees were assured of anonymity following protocols articulated in The University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Clearance for this study.



## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Notions of Lateral Accountability

This section presents notions of lateral accountability shared by interviewees. This information does not specifically address the aims of the study but may be useful for the NSP partners and others to reflect upon. These notions of lateral accountability were presented at the NSP Quarterly Meeting on September 14, 2017.

Table 2 shows the different notions of lateral accountability identified by interviewees and are presented by order of frequency, with the first notion being the most mentioned. It was common for an interviewee to have more than one notion of lateral accountability. Most of the interviewees had a sense of lateral accountability.

**Table 2. Notions of Lateral Accountability and Examples of Interviewees' Descriptions**

| <b>Notion of Lateral Accountability</b>                     | <b>Examples of Interviewees' Descriptions</b>  |
|---|--|
| Reciprocal effects<br>(n=8)                                 | <i>"If something is wrong in one, it will affect the other."</i><br><i>"If one of us fails, it doesn't reflect well on the rest, we all lose."</i>   |
| A sense of collegiality<br>(n=5)                            | <i>"...how we could support each other? I said I'm more than happy for someone to ring me up if they've got something to talk through."</i><br><i>"If anything is identified that needs improvement, well we're all together. Try to bring it up."</i>   |
| Specific acts of collegiality:<br>Working together<br>(n=5) | <i>"Because we are partners and we should work together."</i><br><i>"We partnered up with the migrant resource centre in XYZ*"</i> .<br>* Anonymised   |
| Learning from each other<br>(n=5)                           | <i>"We are more productive in what we do for our clients if we know what others are doing, not only for referral purposes but also for learning purposes."</i><br><i>"Those quarterly meetings are really so great because getting their ideas and what good projects they're working on is great for us."</i> |
| Collective performance<br>(n=3)                             | <i>"The way you perform impacts on the performance of the collective ... if you're looking at your output, that's how it's been perceived."</i><br><i>"I'm really supportive of the NSP, really supportive of it and really pleased to be a part of it ... I want that to be successful."</i>                  |
| Shared goal<br>(n=3)  | <i>"We are accountable to each other because we are trying to achieve the same goal."</i>  |
| Shared values<br>(n=1)                                      | <i>"The settlement journey of those successful clients, you can see being shared because we have got shared values."</i>   |
| Boundary work<br>(n=1)                                      | <i>"I feel I need to be knowing what others are doing and not be seen to be replicating their programs. If we are doing things in the area that they operate in there's that responsibility to liaise with them."</i>  |

The first notion of *reciprocal effects* pertains to a sense of interdependency, where the poor actions of one partner could either impact on how another partner is able to do their work or on the reputation of the other partners. It is noted that this notion of lateral accountability is focussed on potential failings of other partners in the consortium.

The second, third and fourth notions of lateral accountability are rooted in collegiality. A *sense of collegiality* was expressed in two ways. First, there is a willingness to assist and support partners in need. Second, there is an encouragement for partners requiring assistance to seek help. *Working together* and *learning from each other* are specific acts of collegiality. They are manifestations of how a partner could support others. It was observed that interviewees who expressed 'working together' as a notion of lateral accountability either expected this to happen in the future or were already working together. Notably interviewees who identified 'learning from each other' as a notion of lateral accountability were all of the view that they are already learning about how other partners do certain tasks and activities which in turn either helps them improve their own practices or provides ideas for projects in the future.

The fifth notion of lateral accountability, *collective performance*, is also based on interdependency but is focussed on performance of the NSP and how each partner impacts on collective performance. The sixth and seventh notions of *shared goal* and *shared values* hark back to both the purpose of the consortium and the choice of partners for the consortium. The final and eighth notion, *boundary work*, is about clarity in jurisdictions and particularly applies to partners who are working in the same geographical area. It is about avoiding duplication of work.

## 4.2 Benefits of Being a Partner in the NSP

This section provides feedback on the benefits of membership in the NSP. A consortium like the NSP should allow partners with discrete services and expertise to both individually and collectively enhance their ability to better address client and community needs.<sup>12</sup> There was strong evidence from the interviews to indicate that this was occurring in the NSP. Interviewees were overwhelmingly positive in their views of benefits that arise from being a partner in the NSP. The benefits identified during the interviews are highlighted below and illustrated with quotes.

**a) Lifting of quality standards of client settlement services arising from guidelines developed, collated and distributed, and, the training provided by the lead organisation**

*"I think that [the lead organisation] makes a concerted effort to train people in – you know, they've done courses around different areas and even the quality, they're a quality accredited agency, they're trying to bring that idea or that practise to all the settlement partners" (CEO 1) .*

**b) Enhanced ability to improve client settlement services arising from best practices, experiences, information and issues shared by other partners**

*"There's also an opportunity to share best practice and innovation and how – for example one guy had started streaming his information sessions which was like, oh my God. That's the best thing ever. He has 3,000 people watching. Whereas here in the room, you can only have 30 people. So those innovations are really quite something. That's shared with the group" (Manager 1).*

**c) Consistency of delivery of client settlement services arising from the leadership of the lead organisation**

*"The standard of consistency is really reinforced to us throughout, and that's exactly what [the lead organisation] is doing. That's why I said back of the house kind of work – ensuring consistent measures, consistency of delivery of the programs across the partnership. So that it's not like, for instance, in the south, the services are like this, in the north they're like that. It's a consistent standard that everyone needs to abide by" (Manager 3).*

**d) Efficiency in client settlement services arising from partners working together on projects**

*"We worked in partnership with them to deliver the project, with very good outcomes on both sides. They did certain parts of the project, and we did because we have a ... \*specialist person, we got that person to deliver the workshops" (Manager 3).*

\*Anonymised

*"They were able – which is something that the Department never did before – to bring all the recipients together, only because they saw that there's a similar theme to all the projects that were proposed. So, it was a good thing to bring us all together. In the first round I think there were six of us, and we were all doing early intervention stuff for young people. So it was really good then to get together and see what the merits are in all the methodology, in what the other people were doing. So, that was a really good thing in terms of the innovation fund that [the lead organisation] did" (Manager 4).*

**e) Improved ability to develop internal policies of individual partner organisations arising from access to resources of the lead organisation**

*"So things like we're overhauling our ... \* policies and the person doing that's been relating to the ... \* coordinator in Sydney who's had a wealth of experience to draw on to be resourcing that process. So that's really a positive" (Manager 8).*

\* Anonymised

**f) Greater sense of community and valuing of each partner's strengths**

*"Partnerships across the consortium, as I said, are encouraged. It's not about waiting for the meeting to happen. At any time, we can pick up the phone if we identify something we can do together, and we do" (Manager 3).*

*"We would have been in a position to cover that gap because they're so small, but maybe we wouldn't have been in the position to reach out to the people that are working closely with*

*those organisations. I think that that grassroots connection that they have is important to be part of the consortium” (CEO 3).*

*“What I think that [the lead organisation] has done very well is authentically said, we value you and the work that you do. We will not tell you how to work. We will guide you based on how we have to. But this only works if you participate and we hear from you” (Manager 1).*

### 4.3 Lateral Accountability Mechanisms

Having identified interviewees’ notions of lateral accountability and perceived benefits to a partner in the NSP, this section now outlines the mechanisms through which these notions and perceived benefits were encouraged and reinforced.

Table 3 identifies the lateral accountability mechanisms in the NSP and classifies these mechanisms into formal and social mechanisms. Formal mechanisms of lateral accountability are likely to be more common where there is a consortium of organisations that are dispersed in many different locations, as is the case in the NSP.

**Table 3. Lateral Accountability Mechanisms in the NSP**

| Lateral Accountability Mechanisms  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| Formal   | Formal and Social  | Social   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work plans</li> <li>• Budgets</li> <li>• Guidelines to standardise delivery of client settlement services</li> <li>• Training to improve delivery of client settlement services</li> <li>• Settlement Innovation Fund</li> <li>• Communication protocols</li> <li>• Consortium reports drawn from semi-annual reports of partners to the lead organisation</li> <li>• Site visits</li> <li>• Surveys</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meetings – quarterly, monthly and bi-monthly</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working groups</li> <li>• Social media - NSP newsletters, NSP website, NSP Facebook</li> <li>• Ad hoc phone calls and conversations</li> <li>• Emails</li> <li>• Participatory decision-making</li> </ul> |

#### 4.3.1 Formal lateral accountability mechanisms

Formal lateral accountability mechanisms, particularly *guidelines* and *training* to standardise and improve client settlement services, and, the *Settlement Innovation Fund* were previously identified (Sections 4.1 and 4.2) as having allowed a lifting of partners’ expectations and delivery of client services, and increased opportunities to collaborate with other partners. These mechanisms and sharing of best practices were explicitly acknowledged as engendering

collective outcomes for the NSP. They also helped create notions of lateral accountability, through having shared project and program goals.

*Work plans* and *budgets* whilst individually delegated to partners also encourage a sense of lateral accountability, through a notion of reciprocal effects. A partner who does not fulfil their obligations as agreed to in the work plan and budget could negatively impact on the reputation of other partners. A notion of lateral accountability as collective performance highlights that individual performances add up to a collective performance. Individual performance is formally conditioned by the work plan and budget. Work plans, in particular, also triggered questions from interviewees about what work plans of other partners might be like. This interest was focussed on the kinds of programs that other partners had, so as to learn from them or avoid replication. Overall, work plans and budgets helped develop notions of lateral accountability as reciprocal effects, collective performance, learning from others, and, boundary work.

*Communication protocols* were primarily identified from the internal documents on communication protocols. A small number of interviewees discussed branding and how their organisational identity may be compromised, demonstrating some ambivalence. The majority however was not particularly perturbed by it. Communication protocols help construct an outward-looking identity of the NSP. They reinforce notions of lateral accountability as grounded in shared goals and shared values.

*Reports on overall performance of the NSP*, which are derived from individual qualitative reports by partners to the lead organisation, are potentially instrumental in providing an overall picture of the collective performance of the NSP. This formal mechanism allows notions of lateral accountability as collective performance, shared goals and shared values.

The mechanism of *site visits* at partner organisations helps the lead organisation to better understand the needs of partner organisations and the areas in which they may need support. It helps in creating a sense of community and valuing the strengths of partners. This mechanism was especially appreciated by regional partner organisations.

Finally, *surveys* also help create and reaffirm the value placed by the lead organisation on each partner. Surveys reinforce the lead organisation's accountability to partner organisations, for identifying services requiring further training and ways to improve other formal lateral accountability mechanisms such as organised meetings.

#### *4.3.2 Formal and social lateral accountability mechanisms*

Formal mechanisms can offer discursive spaces for social mechanisms to occur. Such is the case for the meetings, in particular the NSP quarterly meetings. *Meetings*, although formally organised by the lead organisation, allow individual interactions to transpire. Interviewees, especially those from community organisations who are not Migrant Resource Centres, found the quarterly meetings particularly useful as a platform to become acquainted with, get to know and learn from each other. This mechanism is particularly helpful in promoting a notion of lateral accountability as collegiality. Prior to joining the NSP, community organisations outside the Migrant Resource Centre network had less opportunities to work with each other and the Migrant Resource Centres.

### 4.3.3 Social lateral accountability mechanisms

*Working groups* were primarily identified from the internal documents and were not a dominant theme of the interviews. However, this social mechanism allows alignment of partners' objectives and clarification of mutual expectations, provided there is wide representation from partner organisations. They could assist in fostering notions of lateral accountability as mutual support, working with other partners, shared goals and shared values.

The use of *social media*, in the form of NSP newsletters, NSP website, and NSP Facebook, is another social mechanism which requires voluntary participation by partners, and, helps promote notions of lateral accountability as shared goals and shared values. We comment further on the use of social media later (Section 4.4.8).

There were three other social accountability mechanisms identified – *ad hoc phone calls and conversations*, *emails*, and *participatory decision-making*. Whilst formally or implicitly encouraged by the lead organisation, they are voluntary in nature. One could view these as secondary mechanisms in the sense that they proceed from both formal and social mechanisms such as training, the Settlement Innovation Fund, working groups and meetings.

## 4.4 Interviewees' Assessment of Current Lateral Accountability Mechanisms

This section presents interviewees' views of the predominant lateral accountability mechanisms, unpacking "what has worked well" and "what has not worked well". This section concludes with interviewees' perceptions on the effectiveness of the current lateral accountability mechanisms.

### 4.4.1 Meetings

Most interviewees perceived that the various meetings facilitated by the lead organisation are effective and helpful. In particular, the quarterly meeting is seen as "*a support mechanism*" (CEO 2) that "*has been an important component of the consortium of actually developing those relationships*" (Manager 6) in order to "*keep the sense of unity*" (Manager 2). Interviewees attributed the effectiveness of this mechanism to four factors, which are explained below:

#### a) Timing and format of meetings

The lead organisation is "*very conscious about the meetings*" (CEO 1). Meetings are appropriately timed (monthly, bi-monthly and quarterly) so that there is "*not more than one meeting a month for people*" (Senior Officer 2). Also, teleconferences are used for other meetings, given the various demands on managers/workers, and the needs of sole and regional workers.

On the other hand, some interviewees expressed the view that the number of meetings is demanding for smaller organisations. Hence, there were concerns about their ability to meet the expectation of 75% attendance for the quarterly meetings. Moreover, some partner organisations were not represented at quarterly meetings by staff or management with appropriate authority or seniority. These representatives were therefore not able to make

decisions or adequately represent the position of their organisations, which affected the ability of quarterly meetings to make decisions for the partnership.

#### **b) Meeting agendas and conduct of meetings**

Interviewees reported that the lead organisation appears to carefully design the agenda for the quarterly meetings, which has evolved over time. The meeting agenda addresses the “*diversity in needs*” (Senior Officer 2) and fosters sharing, collaboration and communication among partners.

The meeting agenda incorporates ‘*relational opportunity*’ and ‘*NSP partner initiatives*’ as agenda items which enable partners to build relationships and share best practices. Interviewees reported that the meeting agenda was always sent ahead of time, allowing partners to prepare accordingly prior to the meetings. This reinforces the sense of lateral accountability by the lead organisation to all partners.

The meetings were convened in a coordinated manner and provided many opportunities for icebreaking, relationship building and networking.

#### **c) A sharing/collaborative meeting atmosphere**

This dynamic seems to have created a positive environment for sharing at meetings. For the quarterly meetings, a large number of interviewees spoke positively about how much they benefited from information sharing and learning. It was also noted by several interviewees that the dynamics at the meetings had shifted dramatically, compared to the first couple of meetings in 2015. The atmosphere at initial meetings was described as ‘unsure’, ‘intimidating’, ‘overwhelming’ and ‘distrusting’; however, these negative feelings dissipated over time and it seems that partners now feel comfortable and identify themselves as part of the ‘big family’ of the NSP.

#### **d) Feedback for each meeting**

The lead organisation collects feedback via a survey after each meeting in order to explore new ways of improving the agenda and conduct of the meeting.

#### **4.4.2 Settlement Innovation Fund**

Interviewees spoke positively of the Settlement Innovation Fund, which provides the opportunity for partners to access additional funds to provide services innovatively, as well as a formal opportunity for partners to work together. Examples of interviewees’ descriptions about the Innovation Fund are:

*“a really unique opportunity for people to do things outside the box”* (CEO 1), and,

*“explicitly testing settlement practice, testing innovation in settlement practice”* (Senior Officer 2)

Notably, participation in the Settlement Innovation Fund has allowed many partners to develop further partnerships within the NSP.

Two factors were identified as contributing to the success of the Settlement Innovation Fund:

- a) The application for the fund was a simple process with basic questions, and was not onerous, and
- b) The lead organisation made efforts in providing further support to partners (training and/or a working group), based on common or similar themes that emerged from the applications. As such, *“it was really good then to get together and see what the merits are in all the methodology in what the other people were doing”* (Manager 4).

It was suggested that more substantive feedback would be helpful to partners that were not successful with their applications.

#### 4.4.3 Training/support programs

The interviewees valued the support provided by the lead organisation, through formal training programs and informal one-to-one support at the partners’ sites. For example, with Data Exchange (DEX) reporting, the lead organisation *“was absolutely supportive”* (Manager 2). Also, the interviewees acknowledged that the lead organisation opens up its own training programs to the NSP partners, which are valuable resources for partners, especially for the relatively small organisations.

In relation to the partnership’s mentor program for case workers, one interviewee commented that the lead organisation provides a level of structure for *“something that isn’t necessarily easy to structure”*. Specifically, the program *“provides a feeling a safety for employers, to speak out and say, I maybe do need some support. Because I think our work is quite isolating. There’s a level of intimidation that could come of that, because you could seem I’m not on top of things, or I need some support”* (Senior Officer 1).

#### 4.4.4 Work plans

A work plan, as agreed by the lead organisation and each partner, clearly sets each partner’s target outputs. It helps partners more effectively monitor their progress on a regular basis and ensure they are on track. A number of interviewees perceived that their accountability to the consortium relates to fulfilling the goals in the work plans, since the consortium’s collective performance is built on every partner meeting the specific goals in the work plans.

#### 4.4.5 Reporting

The combined use of different reports was appreciated by most partners. In particular, interviewees commented that the qualitative NSP reports address the limitations of DEX, which captured predominantly quantitative data and curtailed partners’ ability to comprehensively report on their activities.

Overall, the consortium’s own reporting mechanism has been effective for two reasons. First, it facilitates continuous learning, and second, the lead organisation has addressed the limitations of DEX and ensured that partners are supported. Specifically:

- a) Alternative reports used in the NSP facilitate continuous learning for partners through its focus on qualitative and outcome-oriented reporting. Some interviewees viewed that their organisations’ reporting standard has been lifted as a result.
- b) The supportive approach by the lead organisation is evident in:
  - i. The feedback to individual partners, which included suggestions and options for service improvement. The lead organisation disseminates feedback from



the funding body on each consolidated report. Hence, partners have feedback at both the organisational and consortium levels. One of the interviewees commented that “...*there’s that certainty that someone is actually reading what you’ve done, is actually appreciating what you’ve done*” (Manager 4).

- ii. Its strength-based approach which focuses on the breadth of skills partners have, in writing, showcasing, etc.
- iii. Providing assistance with reporting (e.g., providing advice on how to showcase activities in reports and with data entry) to partners that need it.
- iv. Allowing some flexibility where required for partners that have difficulties meeting reporting deadlines within the partnership.

Most interviewees were satisfied with the current reporting system, commenting that the current six-monthly reporting is less onerous than the previous quarterly reporting (directly to the funding body). The only concern addressed by interviewees was that the reporting system could be onerous for relatively small organisations.

#### *4.4.6 Communication via emails and phone calls*

Email exchanges between the lead organisation and partners are frequent and seen as efficient. Also, many interviewees described how comfortably they could just pick up the phone to speak with the staff at the lead organisation to discuss concerns, clarify issues, or be briefed on issues discussed at a meeting that they had missed. Phone calls also occur among some of the 22 partner organisations (i.e., beyond the lead organisation). Communication via phone calls was considered by partners as highly efficient and effective, reflecting evolved relationships among partners.<sup>13</sup>

#### *4.4.7 Working groups*

A couple of interviewees referred to the mechanism of working groups, describing it as an opportunity to be heard and have input in decision-making. One interviewee spoke favourably of the DEX working group, which according to the interviewee, allows partners to discuss challenges and solutions with DEX reporting.

#### *4.4.8 Social media*

Social media, in the form of NSP newsletters, NSP website, and NSP Facebook, is used by the lead organisation to promote the partnership and foster learning through information on each partner’s activities and initiatives. The lead organisation has a media coordinator that looks after social media. However, it was observed that, although some partners would like to have their organisations showcased in the NSP newsletters and/or on the NSP Facebook, resource and time constraints have been an obstacle, particularly for small organisations.

#### *4.4.9 Summary of interviewees’ assessment*

Overall, the interviewees viewed the current lateral accountability mechanisms as effective, with some areas identified for improvement, as discussed later (Section 6). The mechanisms helped create a sense of belonging and cohesion within the partnership. Partners felt that each of them has a role to play in the consortium. One of the interviewees repeated that “*we are like a big family*” (Manager 3). The effectiveness of the current lateral accountability mechanisms was also partly reflected in interviewees’ view that the NSP has been a success. For instance, one of the interviewees stated that “*I do actually speak very positively about the*

*NSP and I think there's a lot of value"* (Manager 2). Particularly on reporting, a large number of interviewees perceived it to be more effective relative to previous arrangements when the partner organisations had direct dealings with the funding body. Current reporting is seen to be less onerous and there are more opportunities for support as a result of having a lead organisation and partner organisations in the NSP.

The current lateral accountability mechanisms have worked well because the NSP takes a strength-based approach and recognises the different capacities and needs of each partner. A list of identified enablers for the effectiveness of lateral accountability mechanisms is summarised below:

**a) Leadership and staff at the lead organisation**

- The lead organisation has *"a fabulous leadership team...very encouraging and supportive and enthusiastic"* (Manager 6).
- *"They (staff in the lead organisation) have worked very, very hard for what they have and they continue (to do so)"* (CEO 1).

**b) A culture of support, sharing and equality**

- Partners share information in many aspects, including regulatory updates, funding opportunities, policy documents, etc. For instance, one interviewee commented that *"we do a lot of sharing and showcasing and I think that's a really valuable thing that we do"* (Manager 2).
- Partners have a strong desire to help others in need. An interviewee explained that *"everyone here (in the partnership) is very open to help"* and *"it's one of the stronger messages that gets put out there through [the lead organisation]... Need to be sharing and talking to each other, it's very much the message that's put across often"* (Senior Officer 1).
- Partners consistently and strongly felt a sense of a community of equals – each interviewee felt equal in the consortium. This is demonstrated by the use of participatory decision-making. Partners have inputs in making decisions and their agreement is sought when new initiatives for the partnership are to be implemented.

**c) Respect for geographical boundary**

- It was mentioned by a large number of interviewees that the geographical boundaries for each partner have been well defined from the beginning of the partnership, and each partner shows respect for those boundaries.

**d) Value congruence**

- Partners felt a strong sense of shared values and a shared goal for the consortium, specifically to provide the best possible quality of services to clients. This is a significant finding, particularly as half of the NSP organisations were not part of the Migrant Resource Centre network, prior to the establishment of the consortium. Congruence of values by partner organisations is an important foundation for a successful partnership, and indicates good partner selection in establishment of the NSP. This finding also indicates that the formal and social

lateral accountability mechanisms within the partnership have been effective in reinforcing shared values and goals, and strengthening the partnership.

**e) A social approach to lateral accountability**

- A social approach is embedded in several accountability mechanisms, for example, meetings and working groups. This approach is particularly effective in building confidence for relatively small partners, as well as trust building in the partnership.<sup>13</sup> It facilitates effective communication between staff of partner organisations and those of the lead organisation. One interviewee commented that *“it’s probably more communication and more personable for ...\* to be able to call or ask for an extension or get help at that level”* (Manager 7).

\*Anonymised

## 5. Discussion of Findings

The NSP uses a wide suite of mechanisms that engenders a sense of lateral accountability amongst its member organisations. The study's participants have a sense of accountability to the NSP and its members. The participants have a strong view that their actions as NSP members impact on the work performance and reputation of other partners. They also value that they are collegial in the way that they work together and learn from each other.

Formal lateral accountability mechanisms that were identified as being used include work plans, budgets, guidelines, training, the Settlement Innovation Fund, communication protocols and reports. These mechanisms assist to align partners' objectives, clarify mutual expectations, and prescribe appropriate behaviour so that the NSP achieves its desired outcomes. The individual partner work plans and budgets set goals for each partner in regard to activities and use of financial resources. Guidelines set standards for delivery of client services and training, and clarify expectations on delivery of client services. The Settlement Innovation Fund encourages collaboration and cooperation among a number of partners.

The NSP consortium report prepared by the lead organisation provides a balance to the DEX report to the funding body. DEX is an upward accountability mechanism, seen by NSP members as capturing an incomplete account of the performance of partners and the NSP. Many of the interviewees expressed concern with the inability of DEX to adequately capture and report on the outcomes achieved by each partner in the NSP. By comparison, the consortium report is generally perceived to present a holistic account of the NSP's performance.

The formal and social lateral accountability mechanism of organised meetings was particularly useful in creating a notion of lateral accountability through collegiality and learning from each other. The meetings are an effective mechanism to facilitate verbal and interpersonal interactions, where individuals ascribe meaning to items covered in the meeting. The meetings also serve as a useful mechanism by which the partner community organisations acquired a sense of membership to the NSP. This is particularly important to partner organisations which are not Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs), and so prior to the NSP did not have the MRCs' established history of shared work and identity as a group.

The social lateral accountability mechanism of participatory decision-making is also enacted through the organised meetings. This also takes place to a lesser extent through ad-hoc phone calls and conversations outside of the organised meetings. The use of training, meetings and working groups are therefore critical for the social mechanisms of conversations and participatory decision-making to occur. Attendance in training and meetings, for example, paves the way for interactions that help build commitment to quality service and to other partners and the NSP as a whole. Representative participation in working groups clarifies expectations across a wider segment of the NSP.

Note that lateral accountability mechanisms involving multiple organisations in a new consortium, in disparate locations, are more likely to involve formal mechanisms. Formal mechanisms are also needed within a new consortium, and social mechanisms would be

expected to develop further as the partnership becomes established, and social connections are strengthened.

### 5.1 Limitation

The study identified the use of both formal and social lateral accountability mechanisms. However, the semi-structured interview method that was primarily relied upon to generate data meant that participants are likely to have identified the mechanisms that most readily came to mind. It is possible that not all of the accountability mechanisms currently used were identified.

## 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study identified notions of lateral accountability by member organisations in the NSP. Lateral accountability is multi-faceted and has differing emphases including interdependency, collegiality, collective performance and a sense of shared goals and values. The study also described the benefits that accrue to members of the NSP. The lateral accountability mechanisms used in the NSP contribute to the benefits of being a partner in the NSP, and partners' notions of lateral accountability.

The NSP primarily uses formal lateral accountability mechanisms facilitated by the lead organisation. By most interviewee accounts, these mechanisms are effective and helpful. The following are recommendations, including those from interviewees, to assist partner organisations further strengthen lateral accountability.

First, with respect to the quarterly meetings, partners acknowledged the lead organisation's efforts in promoting and facilitating senior partner representation at the meetings. Partners recommend regular and improved attendance by senior representatives of partner organisations at the meetings, to enhance participatory and efficient decision-making.

Second, some partners wish to be more 'visible' in the consolidated reports to the funding body. It is seen as desirable that every partner gets showcased in the consolidated reports, as well as in NSP highlights and NSP newsletters. A possible way of addressing partners' time constraints in preparing news/stories for the newsletters (particularly for relatively small partners) is to involve the lead organisation's newsletter coordinator in drafting news/stories on behalf of partners.

Third, it is recommended that further support be provided to regional partners. This could occur in a number of ways, including more site visits to the regional partners by the lead organisation, to foster a deeper understanding of regional operations. Also, in addition to teleconferences involving regional partners, it would be valuable for case workers across the partner organisations to have an opportunity to meet in person, in order to share and understand the issues that they encounter. A full-day case workers' annual conference, involving both training and networking opportunities, was suggested by a number of interviewees. In addition, it was suggested to have an immigration specialist, organised through the lead organisation, to regularly visit regional partners to provide advice and training.

Fourth, some partners expressed their desire to maintain a level of direct contact with the funding body. This is because they thought that a number of issues requiring advocacy with the funding body relate to concerns at the grassroots level, where partners have the expertise and local knowledge. While it was acknowledged that the lead organisation has been advocating on behalf of the consortium, the view of these partners was that it would be efficient and effective for partners to engage directly with the funding body or local MPs, as appropriate, to avoid their messages being 'lost in translation'. A number of interviewees expressed a need for increased participation with the lead organisation in advocacy activities with the funding body, through a mechanism such as a committee within the NSP.

Fifth, the lead organisation could consider providing additional resources to relatively small partners, to better enable them to comply with reporting requirements. Although the merit of the current reporting system of the partnership was recognised, it was noted that smaller organisations have less resources to meet the reporting requirements.

Finally, lateral movements in the form of secondments are encouraged for the partnership. Secondments between partners could be a means for partners to learn from each other, share best practices, provide mutual support, and, further enhance lateral accountability.

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