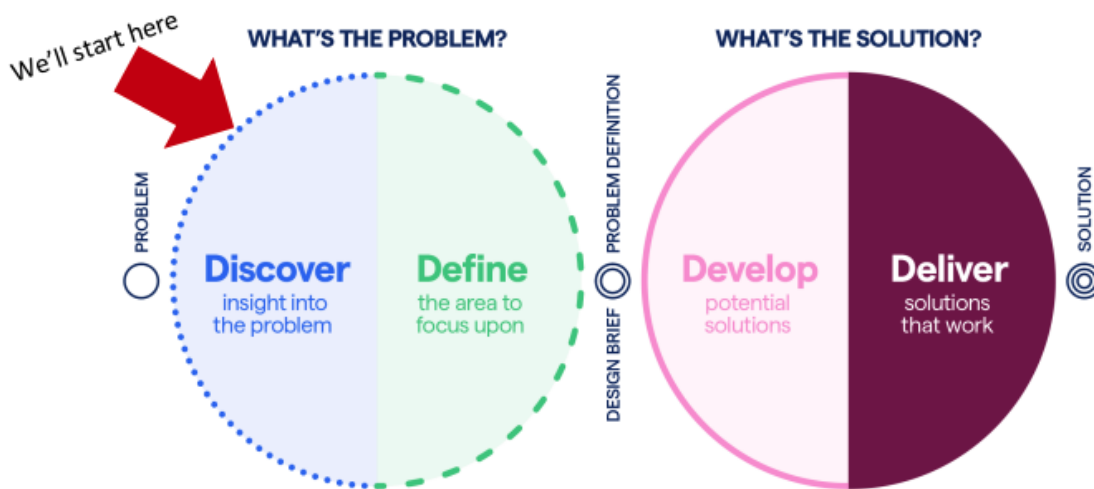


# Digging into the existing system - Root cause analysis

## Background

This template is designed to help teams understand their current environment related to a procurement/ commercial problem. This can be run as a standalone exercise by any team looking to gain clarity on a procurement challenge. The exercise can be carried out remotely or in person but optimal value is achieved when carrying this out in person.

For the exercise to be successful, a multi-disciplinary, cross-functional team should be gathered. Stakeholders present should be of sufficient seniority (or with appropriate delegations and empowerments) to take forward any actions derived from the exercise. The session should be led by an independent facilitator, who is not involved in the project or business concern that relates to the exercise, and does not get involved in the conversation but guides the attendees through the exercises. The facilitator should possess adequate public procurement knowledge to be able to advise the stakeholder group during the exercise, if required.



*Figure 1. The four step user-centred design process based on the “Double Diamond”, a universally accepted depiction of the design process. It’s a simple way to describe the steps taken in any design and innovation project, irrespective of methods and tools used.*

The exercises are based on foresight and futures tools and techniques, and other exercises commonly used in user-centred design (UCD). Why do we do this? Simply put, UCD and the procurement journey are very similar. The procurement journey is formed of 4 phases - Plan, Define, Procure and Manage - and the UCD process we used is also made up of 4 phases - Discover, Define, Develop and Deliver. By applying UCD principles to commercial and

procurement problems, organisations can develop the procurement with the users (the public, suppliers, internal stakeholders etc) in mind.

## Exercise Guide

This exercise is based on the [Iceberg Model](#). Whilst traditional methods of problem-solving focus on addressing symptoms rather than the root cause, the Iceberg Model reveals deeper, less obvious factors which influence visible events.

The Iceberg Model offers a framework for analysing complex problems by moving beyond immediate "Events" or surface-level challenges, which often lead to temporary fixes if addressed in isolation. It promotes a deeper analysis through three interconnected layers:

- **"Events"** - identify visible and obvious behaviours and trends;
- **"Patterns"** - identify recurring trends over time;
- **"Structures"** - examine the systems, policies, and frameworks influencing these patterns; and
- **"Mental Models"** - uncover the underlying beliefs and assumptions guiding decision-making.

With the ever increasing budgetary pressures and the need to achieve more with less across most public sector organisations, this model can help teams understand what the root cause of service failure, unsatisfactory procurement processes or other organisational issues. Particularly in the public procurement space, when organisations are aiming to change the status quo, this exercise will unearth ingrained behaviours, working practices, team structures and assumptions that may stop, slow down or support the change.

## Benefits of Using the Iceberg Model

### **Holistic understanding**

The Iceberg Model encourages decision-makers to adopt a holistic perspective, moving beyond surface-level occurrences to examine the wider system - this could be internal procurement processes, national policies, market trends, etc. This approach facilitates more strategic problem-solving by targeting root causes instead of merely addressing symptoms.

### **Long-term solutions**

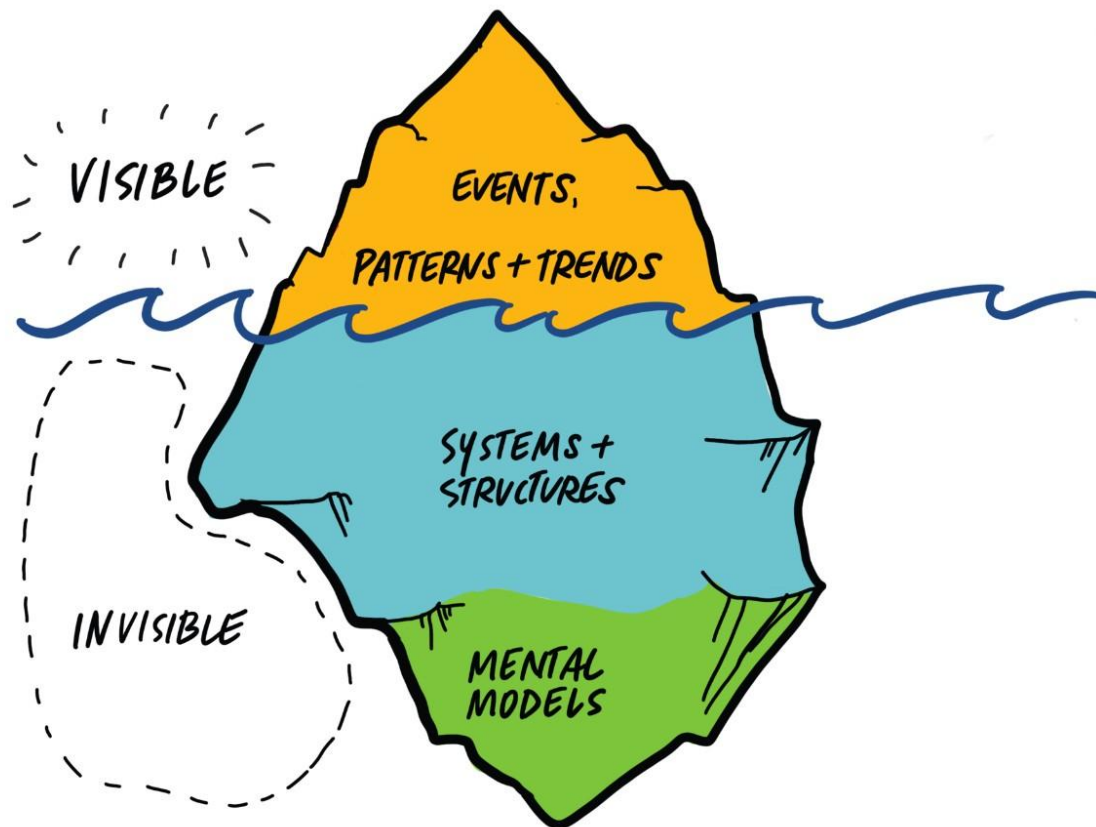
The Iceberg Model facilitates the development of more sustainable solutions by identifying the underlying causes of issues. This approach allows organisations to implement lasting change by restructuring systems and addressing misaligned mental models, rather than resorting to temporary fixes.

### **Improved anticipation of future problems**

Recognising recurring patterns in project delays, for example, allows an organisation to redesign workflows or implement improved communication systems. This helps organisations anticipate future challenges and prevent similar issues.

### Enhanced collaboration and communication

The Iceberg Model promotes more profound team discussions. It encourages transparency and collaboration, leading to enhanced teamwork and problem-solving, by prompting individuals to examine the underlying structures and mental models that influence their behaviour.



*Figure 2. A visual representation of the Iceberg Model. Events, patterns and trends are visible and systems, structures and mental models lie below the surface<sup>1</sup>.*

<sup>1</sup> *Iceberg model* (no date) *Complex Systems Frameworks Collection - Simon Fraser University*. Available at: <https://www.sfu.ca/complex-systems-frameworks/frameworks/unpacking-complexity/iceberg-model.html> (Accessed: 30 June 2025).

## Exercise: Understanding our current landscape: Patterns, Structures, and Beliefs

**Purpose:** To collaboratively identify and analyse the existing structures, behavioural patterns, and underlying beliefs that influence our current way of working in [insert your specific area or challenge]. This will help you understand why things are the way they are (including your organisation, the market, the country etc).

**Preparation:** Individuals should come prepared for open and honest self-reflection, and to constructively challenge colleagues and be challenged by them. Openly acknowledging one's own biases, assumptions, and motivations is one of the first steps in applying the Iceberg Model. Furthermore, individuals should come prepared for exploration and curiosity, which encourages asking questions to understand the "below-the-surface" aspects of others' behaviours.

**Participants:** [List of team members or roles involved - ensure to involve a wide range of stakeholders to get proper representation.]

## Materials Needed

If you are doing this in person, prepare the session by gathering the following materials:

- Whiteboard or large paper (flip charts)
- Markers in different colours
- Sticky notes

For remote sessions, you might want to use [Slido](#), [Mural](#), [Mentimeter](#) (word cloud generator) or other similar software permitted by your organisation's IT policies, which allows you and your stakeholders to record ideas and thoughts.

## Step 1: Introduction and context setting

- **Facilitator:** Briefly explain the purpose of this exercise – to deeply understand the current state of [your specific area/challenge]. Emphasise that this is about exploration, not immediate problem-solving.
- **Challenge statement:** Reiterate the specific challenge or area you are focusing on. For example: "Our challenge is to improve efficiency in our [X] procurement process," or "We want to understand why [Y] happens in our service delivery."

## Step 2: Identifying current structures and patterns

- **Prompt:** "What are the current *structures* (formal or informal), *working practices*, *processes*, and *behavioural patterns* that exist in relation to our challenge?"

- Think about:
  - Formal procedures or policies, including associated guidance for implementing these
  - Informal ways of doing things ("the way we've always done it")
  - Team or departmental setups
  - How information flows (or doesn't)
  - Common habits or reactions within the team or with stakeholders.
- **Activity:**
  - **Group discussion:** Depending on the number of attendees, the room can be split into smaller groups, or kept within the one group, and each group writes down as many structures, patterns, or beliefs as they can on sticky notes (one idea per note).
  - **Group share and cluster:** Post sticky notes on the whiteboard. As a group, discuss each one, clarify, and start to cluster similar ideas. Label the clusters.

### Step 3: Uncovering underlying beliefs

- **Prompt:** "What are the *underlying beliefs* or assumptions that support these structures and patterns?"
  - Think about:
    - What do people believe to be true about [your challenge area]?
    - What are the unwritten rules or cultural norms?
    - What assumptions do we make about our users, partners, suppliers or even ourselves?
    - Examples might include:
      - "We believe change is too difficult"
      - "We need to keep spend local"
      - "People are happy with the status quo"
- **Activity:**
  - **Group discussion:** Again, split into groups and write down underlying beliefs on sticky notes.
  - **Group share and discuss:** Post sticky notes under the relevant clusters from Step 2. Discuss how these beliefs reinforce the patterns and structures.

### Step 4: Exploring "Why?" - Root cause analysis

**Question:** "Why are these 'problems' or patterns currently occurring?"

- For each identified pattern or belief, ask "Why?" multiple times (e.g., [the "5 Whys" technique](#)).
- Consider factors like:
  - Lack of appetite for change
  - Historic arrangements

- Departmental changes
- Lack of resources (e.g., budget)
- External relationships or lack thereof
- Limited options or information
- **Activity:**
  - **Group discussion:** Go through the identified patterns and beliefs from previous steps. For each, collectively brainstorm the root causes. Write these down next to the patterns/beliefs.
  - **Prioritise:** If time allows, vote on or discuss which "why" seems most significant or impactful.

## Step 5: Wrap-up and next steps

- **Summary:** Briefly recap the key patterns, beliefs, and underlying reasons identified.
- **Transition:** Explain how this understanding will inform future discussions (e.g., "This helps us identify what we need to change", "This informs how we might reframe our challenge", etc).
- **Future action:** What is the very next step for this team based on this exercise? (e.g., "Share findings with [X team]", "Move to a 'Reframe' exercise", etc).