Learning and accountability roundtable

On April 2nd Collaborate and GO Lab hosted a virtual roundtable, which brought together leading experts and public- and civil-society leaders to begin a discussion on the challenges of learning and accountability in systems of social support. The discussion aimed to explore the tension between demonstrating value and effectiveness in using public resources, and learning and adapting to address long-term systemic challenges.

We had observed contrasting schools of thought on how to resolve this tension. In this note, we have tried to interpret where there may have been broad agreement, and where there was an obvious disparity of views. We have attempted to make sense of the points of divergence by grouping them into two themes: how end outcomes are defined, used and measured; and how accountability should operate.

It was a broad-ranging discussion conducted in limited time and there were many voices we did not get a chance to hear from. That means there will be things we have mis-represented and things we have missed altogether. But we hope the note serves as useful record to support further discussion in the future.

The discussion was conducted under the Chatham House rule, so we have not attributed any of the points to individuals. A list of participants, including those who provided opening comments, is provided at the end of this note.

Points of agreement

Importance of context

It was acknowledged that there are complex contexts that require flexible, adaptive practice, but there are also more stable contexts suited to application of well-established responses, where it is more straightforward to define what success would look like and show when it has been achieved. The work of [Alnoor Ebrahim](#) was cited as a useful framework to inform this.

In complex cross-sector public service delivery networks, there was broad agreement around the need to move away from trying to make definitive claims about cause and effect. The limitations of public services were recognised: many people solve many problems in their lives without the help of the state or charities. The value of a focus on contribution not attribution in those contexts was recognised.

The limitations of performance management

There seemed to be a general acknowledgement within the group that there are those in all parts of the public service delivery system (frontline professionals, senior leaders, and politicians) who agree that performance management can often be applied in a way that drives unhelpful behaviours, focuses attention in the wrong places, and creates unnecessary work that doesn't help (and can hinder) the desired goals.

The group agreed on the importance of measurement, provided we recognise that *how* measures are used (e.g. for learning rather than compliance purposes in contexts of complexity) is just as important as *what* gets measured, if not more so.

How delivery should work

Defining a shared purpose across delivery partners and those that hold power and responsibility in a system was seen as useful. The value of lasting trusting relationships was acknowledged, and contrasted with the limitations of short term interventions focused on narrow inputs/outputs in many contexts. There was agreement around the need to free up professionals to work flexibly and autonomously, whilst giving these people robust sources of feedback to inform their work.

Points of divergence: how end outcomes are defined, measured and used

The concept of 'outcomes' is often used to refer to the positive changes desired in the lives of people who access services and support. There were a variety of contrasting perspectives on whether outcomes are the most appropriate way to frame success. We heard different versions of how outcomes might be defined, measured and acted upon – and how different approaches might support or undermine public value. For the sake of illustration, we have attempted to summarise contrasting perspectives in the table below, but with two major caveats. Firstly, we suspect that contributors were not applying their points to the same context. Secondly, we do not believe that the group split neatly into supporting one or the other of these positions. Further discussion may have uncovered the importance of context, and / or feasible and desirable ways of blending these approaches.

How outcomes are… ...defined	Outcomes should be defined by each individual user of a service. This helps to empower that person to help themselves, and to enable support that is bespoke to that person.	Outcomes should be defined commonly across groups of people with similar needs. This better accounts for broader society's concerns beyond the individual, and helps enable support that is consistent across time and place.
…measured	Individual stories and qualitative data. While this approach means you lose much of the ability to compare cases against the same standards across different times and places, this was seen as less important than understanding a subtle narrative around each case.	Standardised measurement tools. This approach makes it easier to compare cases against the same standard across different times and places, but individual cases of success or failure may be obscured, and the flexibility to adapt services to needs may be impaired.
…acted upon	The overall (shared) goal is likely to be broad in scope with more flexibility around how to determine if it has been achieved. The emphasis is on encouraging continuous learning and adaption in frontline services, and in resource allocation at the managerial- or governance-level.	Used to provide a specific (and sometimes) shared goal, and to agree in advance a way of determining if it has been achieved within a certain timeframe, sometimes with clear consequences attached to the result. Learning, adaptation and resource allocation are focused on achieving this specific pre-defined goal.

Resolving the tensions in these positions, all of which have strengths and limitations, requires solving some dilemmas. Some of these emerged in the discussion.

How to determine broad public value

In some cases, a good outcome for one person is not necessarily good for another person – yet without some collectively-defined outcomes, established methods of determining public value are not useful. If we do not believe it is possible or desirable to make collectively-defined outcomes relevant for a diverse and complex group of people, how else might we determine public value? Ideas discussed included valuing:

- transparency of practice and information sharing;
- personal or professional responsibility / integrity amongst public service workers (and beyond);
- quality / process / forms of practice (e.g. formation of long term trusting relationships);

- individuals' own determination of what is valuable as part of an overarching aim of collective social thriving.

The need to understand if and how these approaches enable improved lives and more effective use of limited resources to support people was acknowledged.

Solving deep-seated moral trade-offs

Who should outcomes ultimately be defined by, and how do we make them legitimate, accepting that interests and motivations of different parties will never perfectly align? The interests of an individual and the interest of the community they live in, or society at large, often align, but can sometimes exist in tension. Any society must balance its altruistic desire to support its most vulnerable members with the reality that resources are limited and must be used equitably (even as they wax and wane from place to place and time to time).

There is always a balance to be struck between meeting the needs of individuals, and the preferences of wider society. If we enable people to define their own goals, *can we assume* this means we indirectly and more effectively achieve the bigger outcomes public services care about (employment, housing etc)?

Evidence based practice and 'what works', versus 'bespoke by default' and systems change

The discussion about how outcomes are defined, measured and acted upon, fed into one about the basis for service delivery. In particular, the importance of 'evidence-based practice', informed by what has been shown to work in other places and times, was contrasted with a 'bespoke by default' approach, where services are tailored to individual wants and needs, and frontline workers adapt their practice on the basis of what one participant called 'leading measures'. Can 'evidence based practice' and 'bespoke by default' be merged, and should they be? How can evidence be informed by and be developed through collective sensemaking from 'bespoke by default' approaches?

Similarly, the approach of focusing on 'what works' for a particular group in society was contrasted with focusing on the overarching 'system', and the relationships that make it up. The group discussed the difficulty of trying to frame boundaries around elements of the system that only have a partial impact on outcomes, but also the many circumstances when is it helpful to draw boundaries to understand these elements better. It was argued that trusting relationships do not necessarily result in successful systems, which in turn do not necessarily correspond to good outcomes – but that increasing our understanding of the patterns and connections between these might provide useful insight to help improve practice.

Points of divergence: how accountability should operate

Many of the discussions around outcomes pointed to a deeper discussion about how accountability might operate. Again, for the sake of easing understanding, we have tried to group the points made in the discussion: who should be accountable to whom, how is success defined and determined, and what is the ultimate goal of accountability?

Who should be accountable to whom?

There was a recognition that ultimate accountability for public service delivery was exercised by the public, through democratic institutions, but contrasting views about how these might best operate.

One example illustrated how a target from central government could represent public preferences, even when these diverged from the view of professionals. The widely-publicised 4-hour wait-time target for emergency departments in England (introduced in 2000 and retained for 20 years by successive governments) had broad public support, even though clinicians did not always believe it was the most effective approach for maximising positive clinical outcomes.

In a contrasting example, the role of elected members of local government councils was flagged as critical in making sure people worked towards a shared purpose that represents what is important to a community. It was argued that they did this more effectively without pre-defined expectations of what success looked like.

These point to contrasting understandings of accountability. On the one hand, the external imposition of what is valued by one party over another party. On the other, an inherent duty upon all those operating in the public sphere to publicly account for their actions (which some referred to as 'assurance', to give the sense of it being a collective responsibility).

In the former understanding – 'externally imposed' accountability – there was disagreement about whether this supported or undermined ongoing learning and adaptation. It provides an incentive to learn and improve, yet might mean those best equipped to lead such adaptation are constrained by those they must answer to.

In the latter understanding – 'inherent duty' accountability – relies heavily on the intrinsic motivation of individual workers in public service to act responsibility. Therefore, it also requires their own (personal and professional) version of individual, community and public interest to align closely with others in the system, as well as the individual, community and public themselves.

The potential for so-called 'horizontal' accountability was expressed – between peers in different parts of a service delivery system (public sector and civil society), and with members of communities themselves.

How is success defined and determined?

There was discussion about the extent of clarity required *in advance* on what success looks like. A clear definition of success in advance, coupled with a way of knowing if it has been achieved, might enable senior public sector officers to make ongoing decisions and be held accountable against a clear benchmark. Alternatively, leaders might focus their energy instead on stewarding others in the system to respond in a co-ordinated manner to ongoing learning.

Advance definitions of what success look like are often intended as, or turn into, targets – due to the need to know when the defined version of success has been met. The potential for such targets to cause gaming was discussed (whereby behaviours are distorted by the existence of the target, and may no longer align with the actual goal of the work).

This related back to the discussion around outcomes. Should the aim be to improve methods of collective measurement of outcomes, so that they better capture the nuance of individual experience, and can be more reliably used as a benchmark? Or should this sort of aggregated data only ever be used retrospectively, as a 'lagging measure', to inform periodic decisions about resource allocation in the light of current circumstances?

What is the ultimate goal of accountability?

Perhaps the most pertinent part of the accountability discussion was around how it intersects with learning. One idea mooted by several participants was creating a system where accountability structures were not tied to reward and punishment, but rather, used to ensure that ongoing learning happened, and was acted upon. In this case, accountability should be about transparency rather than consequence, enabling all parties to understand services better, and aligning people and organisations around a common understanding of priorities and challenges. It was acknowledged that such mechanisms for creating accountability for learning are not well developed or widely used currently, and more thinking is needed around them. Public perception is one area that needs consideration – in particular, how to practice and communicate an 'accountability for learning' approach so that is perceived as being about improving performance rather than as a way to 'excuse' failure.

Next steps

All participants agreed that this was an important and timely topic to talk about – only made more so by the Covid-19 crisis – and all expressed a strong appetite to pick up the discussion at a future date. All recognised the need for pragmatic approaches, and recognised that solutions will always be imperfect and require compromises between competing imperatives.

In the light of that, we perceive the danger that this becomes a purely esoteric discussion attempting to resolve conceptual disparities – or worse, a repeated re-articulation of familiar tropes. Instead, we need to admit that the contrasting perspectives we have observed in the discussion exist in the systems we all operate in, too, and this is part of what makes them complex. Decision makers operating in public service and civil society are influenced by a wide variety of factors: their own tacit knowledge and biases, the standards imparted by their professional training, the prevailing circumstances of a particular time and place, the political environment locally and nationally, the leadership style and culture of their organisation, and whether they operate in Whitehall, a local neighbourhood charity, or at a level in between.

Developing practical tools that are able to balance all these factors might be the most useful thing we could do for these decision makers. It is not our intention that the group co-designs tools, though. Rather, we hope it may inspire group members to consider multiple perspectives in their own practice, and in the advice they give to others. When we convene again, we hope to explore two questions:

If we accept that there isn't a single version of what constitutes a good system of learning and accountability, what are the factors that should influence our choices?

How might promising examples of new practice inform learning elsewhere?

We shall seek to understand in more detail what contrasting approaches actually look like in practice, and why the particular circumstances of a case might lend themselves to the approach being described. We shall discuss which other approaches might fit the circumstances in question. Through this exercise, we hope to tease out to what degree the tensions can be resolved through practical tools, and to what degree they simply represent different ways of seeing the world.

Attendees

Name	Organisation
Rob Pollock (Chair)	Social Finance
Adam Lent	NLGN
Adrian Brown	CPI
Alex Smith	The Cares Family
Andreea Anastasiu	GO Lab
Andy Brogan	Easier Inc
Anna Randle	Collaborate
Benjamin Taylor	Red Quadrant/Commissioning Academy
Ben Hartridge	Dartington Service Design Lab
Bethia McNeil	Centre for Youth Impact
Clare Fitzgerald	GO Lab
Dawn Plimmer	Collaborate
Deon Simpson	Dartington Service Design Lab
Eleanor Carter	GO Lab
Emily Sun	Black Thrive
Gary Wallace	Plymouth City Council
Jasmin Keeble	Office for Civil Society, DCMS
Jenni Lloyd	Nesta
Jo Blundell	GO Lab
Joel Trounce	iMPOWER
John Burgoyne	Centre for Public Impact
Laura Venning	National Lottery Community Fund
Mark Smith	Gateshead Council
Martin Pratt	Camden Council
Michael Little	RATIO
Nick Davies	Institute for Government
Nigel Ball	GO Lab
Noel Hatch	Camden Council
Oliver French	Lankelly Chase
Pete Babudu	Youth Endowment Fund / Blagrave Trust
Tim Hobbs	Dartington Service Design Lab
Toby Lowe	Newcastle Business School
Apologies:	
Axel Heitmueller	Imperial College Health Partners
Gen Maitland-Hudson	Social Investment Business
Ruth Alleyne	Sport England
Tris Lumley	NPC
Val Keen	Office for Civil Society, DCMS