

The debate on accountability of public service partnerships needs to be evidence based

By Democratic Audit

*The Democratic Audit blog has previously carried articles on government outsourcing by [Stephen Wilks](#) and [Dan Silver](#) – who argued that the government policy in this area has real implications for democracy. In response, [Simon Parker](#) of the New Local Government Network said that opponents of outsourcing were fighting the last war. Here, in response to Parker, **Simon McMahon** of the Social Innovation Partnership argues that this ongoing debate needs to be infused with a strong dose of hard evidence.*

There has been a debate going on about the [delivery](#) of public services and accountability. When public services are delivered by multiple providers, such as in networks, mutuals or partnerships of public and non-public organisations, what sources of accountability are available? Accountable delivery of public services requires keeping track of how public money is being spent and with what



outcomes. When services are delivered by multiple providers, whether public or not, there is a real need to consider how to gather and share this information: one opportunity could be provided by evidence hubs.

A contribution to the debate on public sector reform and service delivery came from Simon Parker of the [New Local Government Network last Friday](#), who called for academics to positively reassess outsourcing to the private sector. He stated that squeezed budgets and pressure to achieve ‘more for less’ mean that the public sector has to innovate and that outsourcing through networks of mutuals, public bodies and businesses could provide the solution. For Simon, the critics of outsourcing also belong in the past: they wrongly focus on a lack of accountability without recognising that large-scale procurements have in fact already been replaced by joint programmes which blur the distinction between public and non-public providers.

This piece is not intended to weigh in on the argument for or against private sector deliverers of public services. Although I am cautious of assuming that private deliverers are automatically more innovative and better value for money than public ones, I do agree with Simon’s description of the current context in many local authorities as *already* one in which the public-private distinction is less clear than previously expected, at least as regards some local services. Yet this alone does not tell us how such programmes can resolve the problem of accountability, or what the accountable delivery of public services by multiple providers might look like in practice.

The debate on public service delivery needs to talk about evidence.

An important aspect of accountability rests on the capacity to know if someone is doing what they have promised to do and, in the case that they are not, to have a say in changing things. For example, at elections, citizens need to know how politicians have acted during their mandate and why, in order to hold them to account by choosing to vote for them or not. In the case of public service delivery, this can be translated to the requirement that non-public organisations justify how they spend the money that they are given and show what they have achieved. Commissioners of public services need to know how to choose what to fund and be able to publicly justify their choices, whilst service providers need to be able to present evidence on what they have done and whether it has produced appropriate outcomes. At the moment, however, when delivery involves multiple public and non-public organisations it is a real challenge to bring together coherent and reliable information from heterogeneous sources.

One example of how to see what an improved practice could look like is the [Project Oracle children and youth evidence hub](#). Project Oracle has arisen at the same time as a range of other evidence-based initiatives in Britain, such as the [Alliance for Useful Evidence](#), [Inspiring Impact](#) and the [Early Intervention Foundation](#). The project aims to contribute to lowering youth crime and violence in London in three specific ways. Firstly, it builds the capacity of charities and third sector organisations to evaluate their work and demonstrate their outcomes; secondly, it develops an evidence base of what works based on these evaluations and secondary literature reviews; and thirdly, it provides a platform which bridges between commissioners and providers of youth programmes, informing the former's decisions of how to allocate public resources and the latter's approach to demonstrating how they have spent money and with what outcomes.

Of course, evidence hubs of this kind also raise challenges. Particularly in the third sector of non-profit and voluntary organisations, evidence is often not gathered consistently over time or across programmes, and the imposition of standardised evaluation and data collection methods across sectors or programmes would be difficult and likely to restrict innovation. However, the objective here is not to standardise programmes, but to embed the gathering and communication of evidence into the way that public and non-public organisations go about working for young people in London.

Pressure on public sector budgets and the related debate on whether service delivery should involve private organisations seems likely to continue. But in local authorities where public money is *already* being spent by networks, mutual and partnerships including non-public organisations, evidence hubs can contribute to accountability by enabling the justification of funding decisions and programme outcomes.

Note: this article represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or the London School of Economics. Please read our comments policy before posting.

Simon McMahon is a Senior analyst at [The Social Innovation Partnership](#)

