

Accountability Works for You Interim Report



“Using this framework has helped us to think completely differently about accountability. We’re now in a position to demonstrate how central it is to value for money and organisational change”

“AW4U has helped to ground in practical reality what could have been quite vague discussions about the importance of transparency and openness in our organisation”

“We think the framework has the potential to offer us a robust and straightforward solution to cultural problems that other forms of evaluation and assessment have missed for years – and a proportionate way to improve”

“Accountability has to be seen as central to the whole approach to transformation and improvement”

- Reflections from the Accountability Works for You pilots

Introduction

In 2010 we published a major piece of research, “Accountability Works”, which set out our vision for accountability, transparency and involvement in the delivery of public services. With the fragmentation in the way that public services are delivered, we considered that traditional forms of accountability might no longer be sufficient to cope with an increasingly complex landscape.

We considered that accountability was best described as a “web” – a connected set of networks and relationships in which a range of people held a range of other people to account for decisions they made and outcomes they achieved. The “web of accountability” has formed the basis of our contention that all those involved in accountability – central Government monitors and inspectors, local non-executives, the press, the public and a range of others – should work together to make decision-making more open and responsive, and to help things to improve.

Central to this is the importance of culture. The attitude of decision-makers, and the attitude of those holding them to account, has to be positive and open for this new approach to accountability to succeed. We focused on cultural change as one of the principal challenges in making public services more accountable, transparent and inclusive.

We decided that, to give this research some practical purpose, and to help organisations going through significant organisational change, we should develop a proportionate and targeted framework allow them to evaluate and improve their governance arrangements. This framework is called **Accountability Works for You.**

Details of pilot areas

The framework involves five separate stages – the formation of a project group, a high-level evaluation, in-depth analysis of a couple of key cross-cutting issues, the formulation of an action plan and finally evaluation and monitoring. As part of the process of developing the framework, we have been working since February 2011 with a number of organisations to work through these stages. Work with two of them – both local authorities – has progressed far enough for us to be able to draw serious conclusions from observing the framework operating “in practice”. Because some of their and our findings on the strength of their governance structures were quite challenging, we have agreed for the moment to anonymise them in the publicity we produce.

A is a county council operating the leader and cabinet model for decision making. It is high-performing, and has had some significant successes in engaging with the public in an innovative way around budgeting and decision-making (having been cited by a number of organisations as an exemplar of good practice in this regard). However, in the face of organisational change, coupled with a feeling that opportunities for meaningful, continued community engagement have not been followed up, they considered that more work was necessary to ensure that accountability and transparency issues took centre stage. They wanted to look at the way that our framework could help them to open up decision-making and improve productivity.

For council A the high-level evaluation (HLE) was carried out as a desktop exercise by officers. The HLE started to explore some of the underlying governance issues. It crystallised a number of issues – and opportunities – which had previously been difficult to discern or describe. In particular, it helped the council to understand what accountability means in an era where Audit Commission inspection is being removed, being replaced by a more citizen-focused attitude which highlights the need for direct democracy and/or more responsive decision-making.

CfPS worked with council A to extract some cross cutting themes from the HLE. The intention in doing this was to move away from the temptation to adopt individual process solutions to particular, isolated problems or concerns highlighted by the HLE itself. The three main areas for further investigation were:

- **The need for more local and streamlined decision making.** The HLE suggested that decisions had in the past been made centrally. This may reflect wider issues around organisational culture and control. Moving to a more locally-based system for making some decisions would involve a significant change in approach.
- **Performance and improvement.** This links in with plans for local engagement and wider issues around accountability. It was thought that there may be cultural issues to tackle in ensuring that information is made available in such a way that allows constructive comment on matters relating to improvement – particularly through overview and scrutiny;
- **Broader cultural attitudes.** It was apparent that there was a culture of compliance and reaction to external stimuli; an understanding of the importance of public involvement, but a lack of managerial and executive commitment to see it through; an unwillingness to cede control over decision-making to others under certain circumstances (particularly to the public).

Steps were principally put in train to tackle these three issues as part of the development process for a Performance Management Strategy. This combines the in-depth analysis and action-planning in the AW4U framework.

At the time of writing, the strategy is still in draft. As it stands it places more of an emphasis on integrating the views of the public, partners and non-executives in the decision-making process. It suggests the establishment of an entirely new, and quite radical, approach to business planning, typified by transparency and openness. Authority A have committed to continue working with us as these plans develop.

B is an urban council with an executive mayor. Suggestions have been made that decision-making – including by individual senior decision-makers – is geared towards supporting and protecting particular interest groups rather than the community at large.

Council B is consequently keen to enhance the way that the mayor engages both with the community and with other councillors, and to enhance its governance arrangements overall. Transparency is seen as particularly important in gaining and building public trust.

Further to evidence from two scrutiny reviews carried out in 2010/11, and conversations amongst several council colleagues, a HLE was carried out. As with council A, this was a desktop exercise.

As with council A, the HLE found that there was more of an emphasis on the process, rather than the outcomes, of accountability and transparency. In particular, there is perhaps too much of an emphasis on set-piece consultation rather than ongoing inclusion. There seemed to be a disconnect between governance/decision-making and local residents that may arise from this approach. Business planning appeared opaque, making it difficult for the public or non-executives to influence decision-making. There was not much evidence that, apart from meeting statutory requirements, the council makes information available in a way that is actually useful to service users. Accountability and governance across partnerships are also fragmented. When it is considered, accountability is discussed as a standalone issue, rather than as an integral part of wider improvement.

At this stage, the process for deciding which issues to take forward for further discussion is under way.

The lessons we've learned

The organisations we've worked with have found that the framework has provided them with significant assistance both in improving their governance arrangements, and getting them ready for major transformational change.

- **Investigating, evaluating and improving governance can be perceived as risky – but there are substantial potential rewards for organisations that do so;**
- **Commitment to using the framework needs to be given from the top of the organisation, recognising that that the framework can, and should, be challenging;**
- **The framework needs to be shown to be flexible, while still providing a useful tool which is not too vague. This has been a difficult tension to resolve, but the latest version seems to strike the right balance;**
- **Organisations using the framework need to put aside enough time to plan their work. Adequate resourcing is also needed, which is why CfPS has developed an offer alongside the framework itself of external assistance, provided by our Expert Advisers;**
- **The “high level evaluation” (the part of the framework that involves a series of questions about the culture of accountability, transparency and involvement in the organisation) can be carried out as a desktop exercise, but further investigations require the involvement of a wider group of people – including councillors, service users and communities;**
- **External assistance may be crucial at certain key stages in the framework – such as the identification of cross-cutting themes for further investigation and drawing up clear action plans.**

Where we are currently and what happens next

Since February, we have been refining the framework. In particular, we've:

- built in to the high-level evaluation a series of “positive” and “negative” qualities to help people understand more clearly the questions that are being asked;
- amended the whole framework to give more of a clear emphasis to the importance of equality and fairness in dealing with the public and other stakeholders;
- explained more simply how the in-depth analysis element of the framework might work;
- provided three hypothetical, but realistic, examples of organisations using the framework, to make it more real and relevant to prospective users;
- put in more detail about the in-depth analysis that follows the high level evaluation.

We are now publishing the revised methodology for the use of the framework. This will be used for the next group of organisations who decide to use the framework. As organisations use it, and come back with their comments, we will continue to refine it. It is important that our methodology continues to change and develop as the context in which it's used changes and adapts. We will make sure that future changes are made in an understandable and transparent way by ensuring that updates happen at regular intervals, and making clear when this occurs. We are planning to make the first revision to the framework in October 2011.

By October 2011 we hope that our work with the pilot councils will have been completed. At that time, we will publish a final report, with full information on the difference that using our framework has made to their culture and approach. We will also provide an update on other participants, including CfPS itself, which is using the framework to evaluate its own governance and accountability arrangements.

For more information

We have now published the final (June 2011) framework on our website. For more information on Accountability Works for You, please contact Ed Hammond, Research and Information Manager at CfPS, on 020 7187 7369 or at ed.hammond@cfps.org.uk or visit www.cfps.org.uk/what-we-do/accountability-works.

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