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The struggle for linking strategic and front-line outcomes in local government service delivery

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ABSTRACT

Over the last 50 years, there has been a transition in articulating local government service delivery, from replacing output-based terminology to an outcomes-based approach. This is understandable given the move from traditional public administration to an increasingly marketised landscape. However, there is a gap between the higher-level strategic outcome lens compared with outcomes pursued by local government street level bureaucrats focusing on casework. Whereas strategic outcomes are positioned at population, target focused or place-based data, at the frontline outcomes are built on personal relationships which emphasise emotional factors. In this paper, we consider the growth of an outcomes-based approach in local government. We also discuss the extent to which the strategic and street level outcome levels can be linked, examining some of the potential mechanisms available to do so and considering whether the ongoing tensions can ever be resolved. We conclude by considering implications for academia in addressing these challenges.

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Why the need to achieve social outcomes?

Many Western governments, including the UK, are desperately seeking answers to the wicked problems (Head and Alford 2015) of economic downturns, financial constraints and social disintegration, as spaces for policy intervention are squeezed and budgets cut, presenting future challenges within the public realm. A growing ageing population, need for integrated health and social care, policies for education, criminal justice, housing, energy and culture all demand economic and social renewal (Liddle and Addidle 2023). This paper mostly

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focuses on the UK, mainly the English context, but we are mindful of how the issues discussed might play out globally.

Since the 1980s social problems have been managed using outcome-based language to communicate positive changes for individual citizens, communities and families. Outcomes are central to improving services for users and carers (Nicholas, Qureshi, and Bamford 2003; SCIE 2020); or a tool for managing public provision (Bevan and Hood 2006; Liddle 2022). Dickinson (2008) notes different kinds of outcomes: *service delivery outcomes* incorporating respect and dignity; *change outcomes* to assess emotional functioning, such as depression; and *maintenance outcomes* to prevent a deterioration in well-being (Dickinson 2008). However, defining 'outcomes' is conceptually difficult (Dickinson 2008) because when strategic targets are translated into frontline outcome indicators they may be interpreted differently (Parker 2016).

Outcome-based language increased and gained traction during the 1997–2010 New Labour era (Department for Education and Skills 2003; Department of Health 2000) with a promise to improve the lives of citizens. Although well-meaning, the desire to improve outcomes was framed within a centralised performance management framework with data collected at street level aggregated as national benchmarks and statistics (Wastell 2011). For example, in the flagship *Every Child Matter's* policy (2003) outcomes were 'the epitome of rational decision making' (Hudson 2006, 227), as they reduced individual experiences into a condensed set of performance outcome measures.

Informing the use of a outcomes in the local government context, persistent social problems led previous UK governments to experiment with different policy interventions within a fiscal constraints innovation strategy (Audit Commission 2008). Local government came under greater public scrutiny as citizens expected efficiency, accountability, productivity and responsiveness (Liddle 2022). Abolished in 2015, the Audit Commission was previously responsible for evaluating local government, improving partnership working and supporting organisations to move from measuring outputs to evaluating outcomes. Many functions were transferred to the National Audit Office, and in each region dedicated Office of National Statistics staff collected outcomes data and created networks for data sharing. Weakening outcomes-based planning, the dismantling of Regional Development Agencies and Government Offices for the Regions contributed to the end of such practices.

Recently the UK Government declared a commitment to redress earlier failed attempts at addressing inequalities and perennial 'wicked issues' in deprived areas of the country (Tomaney and Pike 2020). Since 2019, discourse has focused on achieving social outcomes for the benefit of local communities and individuals embedded in broader definitions of 'value' and 'leveling up'. The use of outcomes-based language continues to remain central to local government planning. Examples include digital improvement

outcomes, place-based and population level outcomes to tackle inequalities, access to public services, and how services are designed to meet personal need (DHSC 2021; Kings Fund 2020; Socitm 2021).

Localised decision making and responsibility for achieving outcomes varies widely (Kerley, Liddle, and Dunning 2019), with few nation states across the globe where the central governing state solely assumes responsibility for all service provision in each geography. Achieving policy outcomes involves a nuanced set of political and managerial processes at the local level, and in most countries street level bureaucrats (SLBs) still matter in achieving policy outcomes for citizens. However, there is strong evidence to show that states experiencing capacity shortages, institutional weakness, and different political cultures will have difficulties in achieving local policy outcomes (Lotta et al. 2022), but when caseworkers understand policy goals, their professionalism and knowledge are critical for implementation (May and Winter 2009). For example, this was identified by researchers on Danish employment policy who found that SLBs with direct engagement with clients were able to get them into employment quickly, whereas politicians and local government managers had limited success (May and Winter 2009).

What are social outcomes, and do they matter?

The imperative to obtain wider societal value and equalise society from policy interventions means addressing factors affecting social determinants of health and wellbeing. With the narrative that social outcomes matter, it is acknowledged that civic stakeholders need to be engaged in assessing needs for transforming quality of life and wellbeing, to ensure their views are considered in outcomes planning. This is not just the range of service providers engaging in the partnership working and commissioning services nexus, but increasingly the inclusion of citizen consumers (Needham 2003) in a marketised and personalised services landscape. Including users in service design is commendable compared with previous 'paternalistic' public administration (Liddle 2016b), but the personalised approach has come under increasing strain with austerity and the dominance of larger provider organisations in the local government marketplace (Needham, Allen et al. 2023; KPMG 2023).

What about the link between strategic and front-line outcomes? High level outcomes can be identified in strategies for health, housing, transportation and economic development (Kings Fund 2023; LGA 2023). These strategies are aimed at serving people well, providing good public services to support local people, but it is understandable that such local government plans will remain high level when aimed at large urban populations. Higher level strategies have always presented challenges in integrating personal biographies and emotional, even traumatic experiences (Bramley et al. 2015).

However, an outcomes approach can also draw on an individual's strengths (SCIE 2018), demonstrating it can cut across service levels of public policy, service design and individual psychology.

The gap exposes how the two worlds of strategy and practice might be perceived, and the continued challenge of linking strategic and front-line outcomes in local government service delivery. It may be thought that strategic data will inform front-line work at the street level as evidence-based practice (Research in Practice 2020), but practitioners are hard pressed to understand how to use such data. At the street level or frontline, far from strategic data informing their work, many practitioners have limited expertise on understanding evidence or using strategically collected data. Moreover, in engaging citizens and service users to determine commonly agreed social outcomes front line staff lack robust mechanisms of stakeholder engagement, operate within diminishing resources and capacities, and citizens preferences and priorities shift over time. Citizens and other stakeholders are also unaware of either national or local government strategic priorities, how these have any connection to front line service delivery, or the complexities of multi-level delivery. Austerity measures have compounded the problems and impacted on local government training and education budgets.

Discussions about improving outcomes relate to strategic decisions affecting a population, for example disabled children, or a single child. However, the two positions are linked, and as Lawton (2005) noted can be loosely coupled to strategic and operational goals. There are also attempts to illustrate connections between outcome levels by zoning into individual life stories and good practice examples from higher data. This can make data look more human, but also helps staff drafting strategic outcomes to see how their vision is applied at the front line.

Aligning outcomes: capacity and practice

There is a divide between strategic and front-line outcomes in their application in diverse practice settings. Limited research exists on key dimensions of social outcomes between stakeholders in different local government functions. Moreover, questions remain about which stakeholder views should prevail in navigating social outcomes: as technical strategic outcomes expressed at the higher-level planning level, or as relational encounters where outcomes may be co-created.

A gap in outcome-based language is the lack of connectivity between the higher-level strategic outcomes and the outcome lens of local government SLBs focused on casework and assessment. This long-standing issue relates to silo working between strategic and front-line staff but is also reflected in research design. At a recent academic conference, the authors noted that discussions of outcome-based language were often focused on the

population level, as targeted, organisational and place-based data. This perspective is essential for planning and implementing service delivery, especially when commissioning for vulnerable groups (Addidle and Liddle 2020; Ongaro, Mititelu, and Sancino 2021). However, the strategic outcomes approach considered in higher level strategy including city and departmental plans can be quite removed from the front line where outcomes are often linked with personal and emotional experiences (Needham, Griffiths et al. 2023).

Although primarily associated with SLB literature (Andreetta et al. 2022; Lipsky 1980; Zacka 2017) how strategic outcomes integrate into micro-practice requires more attention, particularly when applied in hostile and sometimes dangerous environments. The best example is where outcomes are rejected by citizens, or conducted in a setting where a local government practitioner is in fear. Questions remains about how these 'micro-relational' outcomes feed back into strategy, and more importantly how outcomes are negotiated in the SLB tradition. Often the pursuit of applying strategic outcomes can be warped, truncated or even abandoned. Furthermore, because of the siloing and separation between strategy and practice, local government planning staff and street level practitioners rarely possess a holistic view of the capacities and skills across services levels to align top-down strategy with bottom-up practice for identifying social outcomes across the entire outcomes value chain.

New relational forms of governance are not only a challenge to the role of traditional hierarchical forms of government in advanced democracies in the 21st century. They additionally raise questions about the type of institutions and organisational capacities required to synergise the state's own resources with market and civic institutions (Liddle 2016a).

The future? Persistent difficulties in identifying, measuring and linking local government social outcomes

Local government and non-state organisations in England are increasingly required to have formal standards and measures of performance in place (LGA 2020). All people involved in procuring and commissioning public service contracts need to be aware of securing social, economic and environmental benefits for all stakeholders in a particular locality. Indeed, the UK government introduced the Public Services (Social Value) Act to appreciate the gaps between citizens' and users' expectations in local procurement service delivery. However, measuring social outcomes remains challenging. This is not only because of the disconnect between strategy and front-line practice identified above, but also because provider organisations in all sectors develop their own definitions to classify disadvantaged groups and evaluate outcomes by

developing metrics to capture how 'value' has been added. Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) figures have not been updated since 2019 so many local government organisations previously experimented with web-based sources to present performance data, but coverage was patchy and inconsistent. These were meant to enable citizens to assess how well social outcomes were being achieved by local services, but a bewildering and fragmented array of statutory and non-statutory partners now deliver services, thereby rendering it difficult for citizens to judge accuracy or utility of data.

Although a variety of methods are employed to evaluate social outcomes, it remains problematic standardising them due to varied interpretations and applications in diverse practice settings. Moreover, achieving social value involves public managers collaborating with citizens to co- create 'value', but the impact that service delivery has on overall personal wellbeing and broader physical infrastructures also affects how interpretations of 'common good' vary. If you are a local businessperson the response might be 'to create more employment', a local community group 'to have a local park', health agencies would suggest 'more hospitals', whereas a local government chief executive might argue for educational spending on schools. Identifying or creating 'value' is multidimensional and means different things to different professionals.

With the increase in digital governance in local government, new metrics may in future improve understanding of the interaction between high level outcomes and social outcomes, but it is open to question whether this will capture the emotional context of front-line outcomes. The holistic and multi-faceted nature of social problems make it difficult to disaggregate interconnected social issues. For instance, there is no universal agreement on whether poverty results from lack of employment, an inability to enter the workforce, poor access to transport, poor educational facilities, or lack of good social housing. Nor is the degree to which general well-being results from wicked issues (Head and Alford 2015), such as lack of GPs or hospital facilities in a local area, poor diet and nutrition, or opportunities for engaging in social activities like sport.

With the call to bring emotion into government, we need more emotionally nuanced approaches to redefine the state. Whereas strategic outcomes are positioned at population, target focused or place-based data, front line social outcomes take place in emotive, often intangible contexts, and reliant on relationship building and trust. We lack appropriate research methods to gather qualitative data on relationship building to identify which social outcomes are developed. Narratives, story-telling and good practice examples that link high level (often quantitative) data with front line examples could 'humanise' data collection. This would support strategic and technical staff in providing aggregate data at a higher level, but also include the impact that

a 'world view' can have on the lives of citizens in daily contact with front line services.

To understand what social outcomes means to diverse stakeholders across client groups requires a cultural shift to develop innovative mechanisms where local government officers pose the right questions, stimulate dialogue and more fully understand the eco-systems in which they collaborate with stakeholders. This will allow officers to engage the correct stakeholders at the right time, on the right issue, for the right purpose. All these significant processes need to be in place for conversations about what co-produced social outcomes should look like, and how evidence of achievement can be recorded and measured.

We need a fundamental examination of what is meant by social outcomes, how we capture, and measure enhanced policy performance, and a broader understanding of what matters to citizens and service users. The need to relate to broader stakeholders led many public service organisations to develop innovative service delivery mechanisms but the multi-level and fragmented governance system presents numerous problems, not least how to marry central government policy maker's understanding of achieving social outcomes with local government and citizens' understandings of the phenomena. All will require a complete redesign of internal and external value chains to enhance service delivery, and a number of steps in stakeholder engagement to add value to all processes. From design stage to social outcomes, new mechanisms need to identify and make judgements on selection of the most important stakeholders as well as deciding on the criteria for engagement and measuring performance.

Local government officers rely on a diminished level of data to inform strategic policy making and local implementation. Complex and fragmented governance, as well as continual emasculation of regional and local data collection and analytical functions have exacerbated problems. Whereas the politics of the welfare state had relied on a highly institutionalised national local government system, dominated by service-based policy communities, contemporary national-level policy processes involve more diverse types of actors and, in many cases, cut across service-based boundaries. Furthermore, aligning top-down central policy making with co-production and engagement at street level highlights that current capacities across multiple governance levels are inadequate for resolving ongoing central and local tensions in the short term, but even in the medium to long term, without a serious overhaul of the entire governance system, it seems problems will persist in the quest to achieve social outcomes for citizens.

There is a long tradition in local government scholarship on how policy initiatives developed by central government transform financial resources, management structures and accountabilities, and most importantly for this paper how outcomes are achieved (Elcock 1994). Laffin, in noting how central-

local relations had been a neglected topic of research, called for a new research agenda to improve understanding of local policy processes and outcomes within the wider context of non-local factors and actors (Laffin 2009). He argued that outcomes can only be understood within the constantly changing reconfiguration of central and local governance. A key question remains on the extent to which these changes have modified the policy systems within which local government is embedded, and whether they are more pluralistic or open than the old policy communities which once dominated local government policy-making at the centre. Moreover, scholars might also consider whether continual changes to central local government relationships affect the achievement of policy outcomes set at national level but implemented at the street level.

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