

# **Does ‘Deliverology’ Deliver?**

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## **Abstract**

The deliverology approach has been implemented in many different jurisdictions. Proponents claim that the approach significantly improves delivery of policy outcomes. Others argue that some of the claimed improvements result from “gaming” of measures, that the approach is best used in situations where government agencies are performing poorly and where short-term clearly-measured goals can be identified. Furthermore, many of the improvements noted in various jurisdictions plateau or regress over time. The evidence also suggests that significant resources are required to properly implement the approach. This report concludes that while the top-down, measurement-driven approach can be successful in the short-term, the Implementation Unit approach adopted by the UK, Australia and other jurisdictions might be a better long-term model<sup>1</sup>.

## **Introduction**

‘Deliverology’ emerged in the United Kingdom during Tony Blair’s tenure as Prime Minister (PM). The approach was meant to help the PM deliver on the promises made by the Labour Party during the 2001 electoral campaign. Deliverology employed goal setting, performance measurement, and the use of tight feedback loops to ensure that departments delivered on these campaign promises. In this respect, it is consistent with other results management approaches noted in public management and in fact, was a component of broader management reforms in the UK that included the use of performance agreements and business plans.

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As the use of deliverology has spread, so too has criticisms about its assumptions, methods, and effectiveness. While sponsors laud its focus on key outcomes, detractors decry its potential for creating toxic work environments. While proponents cite favorable outcomes, opponents highlight gaming of measures. While advocates proclaim successes, cynics criticize the command and control nature of the approach. This paper explores the literature to discover whether the available evidence supports one view or the other. We first define the concept of deliverology and discuss it within the context of performance management and measurement practices in the public sector. We then identify the positive and negative outcomes of the approach available in published research.

## **What is Deliverology?**

According to its designers, deliverology is "...an approach to managing and monitoring the implementation of activities" (McKinsey, 2011, p. 32). Others define it as a system for maximizing successful delivery (Watkins, 2013) using an approach that is meant to be scientific (Bald, 2013; Watkins, 2013; Cummings, 2015) in that outcomes are closely linked to activities and data are used extensively for making decisions about how these linkages are established and modified. As such, it embodies core elements of classic results-based management which consists of goal setting, metrics, tracking performance, building 'robust performance dialogues' and establishing linkages to individual incentives.

Many organizations have implemented deliverology through the creation of "delivery units" (DUs) (accordingly, we will use the term *DU* instead of *deliverology* from here on). Panchima and Thomas (2014) point out that the DU was in fact, a component of ongoing reform in the UK government that started with the 1998 creation of Public Service Agreements and was embedded in a 20-year process of performance management reform. The DU concept captured imagination, however, and became one of the most well-known elements of the UK's public-sector reform initiatives. Given this background, it is

reasonable to first examine the broader performance management literature before exploring the specific impact of the DU approach.

A review of 50 of the most cited articles on performance management reveal a common thread of applying private sector management techniques to public sector organizations. Reasons quoted for adopting this approach include diminished accountability in the public sector (Heinrich, 2002), perceptions of public sector inefficiency and the belief that private sector models would lead to greater productivity (Worrall et al., 2010).

Three specific management practices emerged from this reasoning. First, organizations adopted a “bottom-line” mentality (Boyne, 2002) resulting in “business-oriented” accounting processes including attempts at Activity Based Costing in which operating costs would be attributed to outputs instead of inputs (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994). Second, a concomitant shift in thinking occurred that emphasized the use of economic productivity models instead of more traditional government-oriented social principles (Loughland & Thompson, 2016). This led to the growth of *consumerism* (Stewart & Walsh, 1992; Rhodes, 1996) in which citizens were to be treated as customers rather than as engaged participants (Stewart & Walsh, 1992; Box, 1999). Third, market-based competition was also advocated (Stewart & Walsh, 1992; Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; Seddon, 2009) resulting in the growth of contractual relationships that began to crowd out traditional trust-based relationships common among public servants (Stewart & Walsh, 1992; Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; Rhodes, 1996; Worrall et al., 2010; Pollitt, 2013). Overall, performance management techniques which judged people and organizations on how well they met established targets became a leading accountability model (Stewart & Walsh, 1992; Johnston & Pongatichat, 2008; Worrall et al., 2010; Poister et al., 2013). This bottom-line “meet the target at all costs” orientation is a key foundation of the initial PDMU in the UK.

Some of these changes did have a positive impact on program outcomes. For example, Poister et al.'s (2013), research with the U.S. public transit found that "...results provide at least limited evidence that both strategic planning and performance measurement, the principal components of performance management in public organizations, do contribute to improved performance in small and medium-sized transit systems in the United States." (p. 632). However, they follow this conclusion with a caveat that the public organization in question had explicit goals that were readily quantifiable (e.g., ridership figures), but that not all public-sector organizations can easily quantify their expected outcomes. Andrews and Van de Walle (2013) also argue that ease of measurement is a key factor that explains why performance management initiatives seem to work well for programs delivering specific short-term outcomes. The findings indicate that performance management methods can deliver positive results under certain conditions (Heinrich, 2002). One of the challenges noted, however, is that these "certain conditions" are not recognized leading to a "one size fits all" mentality. Sanger (2008) concluded in fact that "there is broad agreement in theory on the numerous ways performance measurement can help, even while there is significant debate about its failings in practice." (p. S71).

Not all performance management initiatives led to success. Researchers observed that true market competition in the public sector was not possible due to the political context (Stewart & Walsh, 1992). The lack of real market pressure rendered government decisions less comprehensible, less accountable, less accessible, and more subject to corruption (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994). Marketization also had the effect of fragmenting government operations into smaller, more narrowly focused agencies with extensive contracting out of operations. In some cases, the approach sometimes led to weakened social problem-solving capacity partially due to the breakdown of the internal trust-based network (Stewart & Walsh, 1992; Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; Rhodes, 1996; Box, 1999) and partially due to the loss of corporate memory to the contracted organizations.

The extensive use of contracting can also vitiate accountability loops by making federal politicians responsible for low level decisions they are not actually making (Harris, 2013). The contracts legally protect contractors while giving politicians a way to externalize blame should things turn out poorly (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994). “The danger is that the development of contractual accountability will restrict political accountability, which remains the basis for action in the public domain.” (Stewart & Walsh, 1992, p. 515).

Moreover, treating citizens as customers can backfire as the public good is not always reflected in individual self-interests (Box, 1999). Government services that require rationing of resources or choosing between competing interests are not amenable to a market focus (Stewart & Walsh, 1992). And, in terms of the bottom-line orientation, it has been argued that the political context can encourage the setting of vague goals to make sure that all constituents are represented (Boyne, 2002; Latham et al., 2008), a practice that runs counter to the evidence showing that short-term, specific goals are a key success factor for performance management systems.

Some researchers argue that the premise of measuring performance in public sector organizations is fraught with frustration.

*“Acknowledging that working with limited data is inevitable, and that performance measures will be indicators, at best, and not highly accurate gauges of actual performance, it seems short-sighted to focus annual program performance reports primarily on performance comparisons”* (Heinrich, 2002, p. 721).

Misspecification of measures can have negative and far-reaching consequences such as a reduction in the skills and knowledge of staff, disruption in cooperation and trust, decreased knowledge sharing, innovation, and learning (Diefenbach, 2009). Specific, short-term outputs are more easily measured and so it is easier for managers to focus on the short-run, particularly during election cycles (Worral et al.,

2010; Loughland & Thompson, 2016). In addition, performance management systems often enforce a single perspective that centralizes power and authority designed to meet the interests of one specific stakeholder group (Little, 2012; Sanderson, 2001; Worrall et al., 2010; Watkins, 2013). In such systems, only particular outputs are measured because they are relevant to objectives chosen by those in power who often take a narrow perspective on desired outcomes, efficiency, productivity, and accountability (Diefenbach, 2009). This is a problem because democratic governments are supposed to represent all segments of society in which wide ranging views exist. Any single measure will always serve some interests over others (Stewart & Walsh, 1992).

In addition, one of the key success factors for managing performance is to link activities to measures to outcomes. Yet, in the complex world of public management, measures are often poorly defined and not well-linked to performance information therefore confounding cause and effect relationships (Pettersen & Nyland, 2006). It has been pointed out that most managers can very quickly and easily learn to game the system for their own benefit especially if there is a strong link between performance measures and job security (Cragg, 1997; Diefenbach, 2009; Seddon, 2009; Heinrich & Marschke, 2010; Wastell et al., 2010; Pollitt, 2013).

Researchers also highlight the fact that top-down target-driven approaches can erode the notion of professionalism in the public service (Stewart & Walsh, 1992; Diefenbach, 2009; Worrall et al., 2010; Harris, 2013). For example, when teachers or doctors are being told how to do their jobs by administrators who have no training or experience in those professions but who hold them accountable for unrealistic or inappropriate performance measures, the people delivering the service feel disenfranchised. Townley et al. (2003) note that in these situations, the individual is no longer responsible for their actions as “the control of behavior passes from the authority of the conscience of the associated individuals to the planning authority of societal organizations” (p. 1067). If the performance measurement regime exerts a

strong enough influence, it may crowd out intrinsic motivation so important to public servants (Lee & Jimenez; 2011).

Overall, the evidence suggests that governments have largely failed to show increases in efficiency from the use of performance management methods (Worrall et al., 2013). At best, we note mixed results (Johnston & Pongatchat, 2008; Poister et al., 2013). Outcomes are positive in situations where short-term, specific and objectively verifiable targets can be set. In other situations, however, where government organizations wrestle with socio-political and conceptual issues, these types of targets are admittedly difficult to create (Stewart & Walsh, 1992; Cragg, 1997; Pettersen & Nyland, 2006; Diefenbach, 2009; Heinrich & Marschke, 2010; Saunders, 2015).

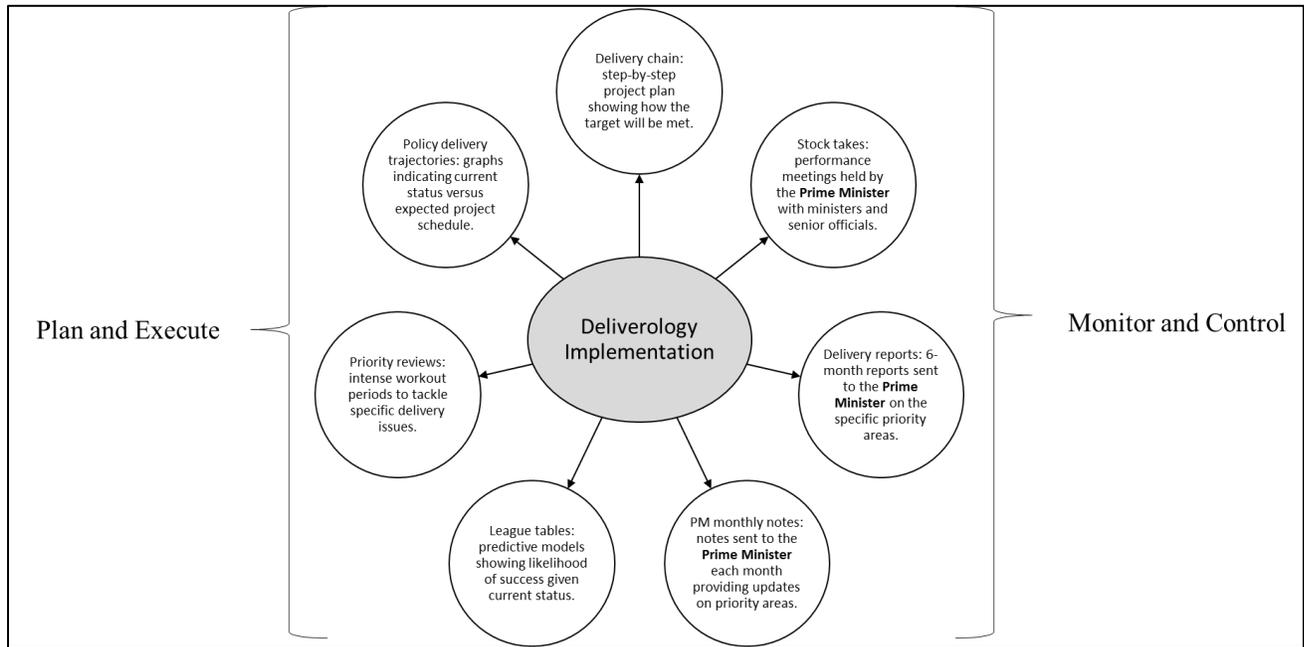
## **The impact of Delivery Units: Evidence**

With this background on performance management in mind, let us now examine the evidence for and against DUs. As discussed earlier, the DU concept started in the United Kingdom but has been also adopted in Canada, the United States, Brazil, Chile, South Africa, Uganda, Pakistan, Malaysia, the Netherlands, and Australia. It is important to note that the original version of the DU was abolished by the UK's coalition government in 2010. It was later reincarnated in the form of an Implementation Unit that has a broader mandate and that eschews the top-down, target-driven approach characteristic of the initial PDMU.

In terms of effectiveness, this initial version of the PMDU is said to have met at least 80 percent of its targets (Gold, 2014; London School of Economics, 2015). Why might this be the case (we use the term “might be” because some have argued that some indicators were “gamed” and that causality is difficult to ascertain)? There are two fundamental reasons for the success of the early PMDU. First, the objectives established were narrow, departmental-specific, and relatively easy to measure objectively: hospital wait

times, literacy, on-time trains, and number of crimes committed. Second, the implementation of the PMDU featured extensive planning and monitoring—the latter by the Prime Minister himself. Figure 1 provides an overview of the initial implementation model.

Figure 1: Implementation Model, UK 2001



The left side of Figure 1 shows extensive and detailed planning related to specific, measurable objectives. The right side demonstrates the remarkable involvement of the Prime Minister. Anyone who has worked in the public sector for any length of time would be hard pressed to argue that with such a model in place, departments would not be motivated to meet their targets. When implemented for broader objectives that cut across departments however, and when the political leadership is not as engaged in continuous monitoring, the sense of urgency would not be the same, and the complexity of outcomes realization would increase. Several jurisdictions, including the UK, have renamed their units Implementation Units because they do address boarder policy-related issues and seek to help improve overall productivity and efficiency (Seddon, 2009; Worrall et al., 2010; Ball et al., 2012).

Overall, little empirical research exists to either support or debunk the claims attributed to DUs. Searching first in both the Web of Science citation database as well as ABI / Inform Global for the general search term ‘deliverology’, with the only restriction being English results, thirteen results were returned between both databases. Six of these papers were magazine articles, three were peer-reviewed journal articles, and two were articles in trade journals. In contrast, thousands of articles address “new public management” and “public sector performance management”. Evidence on the impact of DUs is therefore limited, but what is available is instructive for public management.

#### Delivery Units: Positive outcomes

A review of observational studies suggests that the following positive impacts of DUs:

- Provides a focus for operational activities
- Establishes accountability
- Engages personnel in reviewing the drivers of performance and making changes to improve outcomes.

These claims have been made before for New Public Management and results-based management. What is different about the DU? Table 1 provides a summary of case and observational studies examining the DU approach (one study on Compstat, the target-driven approach initially adopted by law enforcement agencies in the US, is included for reference because it bears close resemblance to the DU approach). It is important to note here that the Implementation Unit approach identified in the table generally eschews the focus on top down command and control and in some cases, help to strengthen policy formulation by considering implementation issues during policy development (Gold, 2014).

Table 1: Summary of the Evidence

Source	Year	Form of DU	Reported outcomes	Comments
Ball et al., (2012) -case studies of 4 schools in the UK; 93 interviews with students, teachers, parents and administrators. (Panchamia and Thomas, 2014)	2012	Centralized in Cabinet office. Direct involvement of PM in monitoring.	-Improved performance in test scores of 16-year-old students in key boroughs (2001-2005) -from 80% patients admitted within four hours to 98% (2003-2006)	Bald (2013) and Ball et al., (2012), report on some of the gaming activities involved in reaching these targets. Conclusion is that the results were less impressive than reported.
Haringey Council, North London (Etherbridge and Thomas, 2014). Interviews with leaders in Haringey Council 18 months into their DU implementation.	2013	Corporate Delivery Unit.	Council views the CDU as effective Reports from officers within the jurisdiction: -saves time in making decisions -helps to focus on outputs -direct impact on performance, ensuring we have the right activities in place to deliver	-their approach represented change from the UK PDMU model -more frequent reporting (every 2 months) on a broad range of targets as opposed to the single focus every six-month stock takes -flat team supported by experienced senior manager as opposed to linking to the head politician
Bureau of Justice Assistance Report on Compstat, state and local level (US). Survey and follow up conference of 166 agencies in the US who had implemented some form of Compstat.	2013	Setting of targets, continual measurement, meetings to determine how to use the data to change practices.	-internal information sharing	Bureau of Justice Assistance Report on Compstat, state and local level (US). Survey and follow up conference of 166 agencies in the US who had implemented some form of Compstat.
Canada and the UK (Gold, 2014). Review of literature; interviews with 22 officials in 10 jurisdictions, both central agencies and line departments.	2014	Implementation Units that focus on scrutinizing policies before they are made official. Reports through Cabinet committee as opposed to the PM directly.	-defined focus -policy proposals that considered implementation -stronger more realizable policies	Canada and the UK (Gold, 2014). Review of literature; interviews with 22 officials in 10 jurisdictions, both central agencies and line departments.
Review of four major reform efforts in the UK (Panchamia and Thomas). Literature review, 34 interviews with politicians, officials and experts, 21 interviews with officials involved in changes, workshops and follow up interviews with senior officials.	2014	UK's PDMU	-progress on key priority areas -no so much on those not thought to be critical. Underlines importance of PM involvement -opportunity for Department heads to speak directly with the PM -PDMU acted as "research unit": working with department heads to dive into areas that were seen to be problematic or where progress had stalled	-creation of the DU was politically driven but part of a broader performance management agenda that included business planning, public service agreement etc., -folded into the Treasury later to address issues that required horizontal management across departments -also adjusted to reduce the top-down target driven model adopted by Blair and Barber
London School of Economics study. Survey of top and mid managers (not clear how many responded), interviews with 22 current and former members of DUs	2015	Varied	"While there is no conclusive evidence of the effectiveness of delivery units, common sense and good governance indicators imply a significant value..." p. 4	Provides nine recommendations for successful implementation. In summary, involvement of political head, clear targets, a culture conducive to the use of data to influence improvement. Overall, suggests that deliverology is a "legitimate approach to public management"
Reevely (2016). Ontario's experience as reported in the National Post. Cites examples from Ontario and hospitals in the UK.	2016	Education	-targets met, but fading over time -changes in measures to meet targets -heavy resource requirement	"Deliverology is a rescue method when a government is failing at something important, not something that works permanently."

From Table 1, we note several outcomes of DUs.

1. The approach encourages personnel to focus on key outcomes. The level of scrutiny involving senior managers sends a clear message about what is important in the organization.
2. It enhances accountability. The focus on key outcomes and identification of high and low performing units (particularly related to Compstat types of initiatives) does make a significant difference in improving program outcomes.
3. It can promote engagement of employees in performance improvement. Because of the visibility afforded by the DU, there is a strong commitment to ensuring continual improvement in activities that drive expected outcomes.

Overall, the DUs appear to accomplish some of the outcomes promised by various public management reform initiatives. The initial PDMU did so because of the involvement of the PM, the focus on clear measurable goals, and the continuous use of performance data to identify improvement opportunities. The Implementation Units take a slightly different approach that includes broader mandates, less direct involvement of the political head, and less of a focus on front-line service measures.

#### Delivery Units: Negative outcomes

Some of the more notable examples of DU impact in the UK are in health services and education. In the National Health Service (NHS), research shows that the measurement regime led to managers ignoring aspects of service delivery not being measured which resulted in lapses of safety, particularly related to wait times (Worral et al., 2010, Reevely, 2016). Seddon (2009) describes situations in which patients with less than life-threatening injuries were left untreated for prolonged periods of times and ambulance drivers who downgraded emergencies so that they did not reflect in the response time target. Other researchers noted that the focus on meeting targets above all else encouraged doctors to release patients prematurely from the ER among other lapses in patient care which caused unnecessary deaths (Reevely, 2016). The former chief executive of United Lincolnshire Hospitals NHS Trust claims that he was

prevented from raising concerns about safety and other staff were also discouraged from raising concerns because the hospital would be punished for poor performance (Harris, 2013).

In the UK educational system, the DU approach appeared to force teachers to comply with practices with which they didn't fully agree (Coffield, 2012). These included the use of excessively-rigid lesson plans and questionable teaching practices (Bald, 2013). Coffield's evaluation suggested that the largest improvement in test scores took place before the DU was put in place. After the DU was implemented, test scores in science showed the biggest improvement even though these were not included in the DU targets (Coffield, 2012). Others have argued that positive results attributed to the DU were based on flawed statistical procedures which, when corrected showed little improvement in test scores (Seddon, 2009).

One of the other outcomes in education was the phenomenon of teaching to the test which resulted in questionable outcomes for children (Little, 2012) since it can stifle intellectual curiosity and morale given that students were judged only on exam numbers (Seddon, 2009). In addition, since socio-economic status has been shown to explain approximately 77% of the variance in test scores, the target-driven approach has little room to add value (Coffield, 2012).

Loughland and Thompson (2016), describing the impact in the Australian education system observe that the target-driven approach was, "...a form of epistemological reductionism, that cannot account for the multiple purposes of education, the possibility of intelligent problem-solving by professionals in specific contexts, and the limitations that deciding what works best imposes on identifying problems and their solutions." (p. 125). Andersen (2008) discusses similar results from the Netherlands where their statistical results show no real improvement from target-driven approaches but some negative impact related to equity of outcomes among students. "This means that at schools using the reform instruments, students' socioeconomic status has more impact on their educational achievements." (p. 554).

The Canadian province of Ontario also noted mixed results from the DU initiative. Reevely (2016) argued that the approach seemed to work well for the province: math scores on standardized test did improve as did literacy scores. These improvements have since attenuated however, and graduation rates are up 'on paper' as a result of a change in measurement. In reality, graduation rates remain stagnant.

Reevely further argues that the results were only achieved with a massive increase of \$4B CAD over the course of the intervention. Michael Fullan, a top education advisor to the Ontario government, admits that math results are still a challenge for Ontario even after the noted improvements. Similar budget-related criticisms are also described for Ontario's health care system which increased spending by \$23B CAD in one year.

These examples reflect Worrall et al.'s (2010) observation that DU projects tend to increase costs and introduce a focus on quantity over quality, as well as Seddon's (2009) insight that more resources seem to be the main prescription for the introduction of DUs.

In summary:

- Top down control and target setting characteristic of the original DU can lead to gaming of measures
- Personnel will tend to shift their focus towards those service-delivery items that are closely measured sometimes ignoring other service elements
- DUs can increase administrative costs

## **Conclusion**

The DU approach promises to be the science of successful delivery. Examining the mixed research results shows that it could be successful in circumstances in which centralized command and control is appropriate, where goals are simple and easy to quantify, time frames are short, and performance on goals can map directly to the social outcomes desired. These characteristics describe the situation in the UK when the PMDU was introduced. Performance on key outcome measures was poor and the government was determined to right the ship to speak. When applied to more diffuse goals, with longer time frames and multiple stakeholders, the Implementation Unit (IU) approach, which tends towards more participative management styles might need to be considered. The focus for some IUs is on testing policy for potential implementation issues during the formulation stage. The approach includes the same focus as the DU on linking activities to policy outcomes, on using data to inform decisions, and on ensuring that people involved understand the program as well as how to use data to drive improvement but does so in a less command and control context more suitable to ongoing operations of government organizations.

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