We know what is possible – so what do we need?

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"This has hit the nail on the head!" one delegate told me at the end of the NCF and KareInn event on Unlocking the Potential of Data in Social Care. *"This is the once in a generation change factor – and social care has to get it right!"* No small task for social care, particularly amongst the myriad of other urgent priorities impacting the sector. However, after the event I remain ever more convinced that unlocking the potential of data has to be core to business effectiveness, core to service development and core to evidencing the impact of what is delivered round the clock in social care services across the land.

Now - I never like to leave a meeting without a list of next steps (and usually jobs to do!) and this event provided that in spades.

Be the Change

Dawn Ahukanna gave us the clue to the first action in her presentation on IBM Watson. She was very clear about ways in which data is being used to drive fundamental change in expectations, delivery and product in different industries. Data is an 'enhancer' and in order to maximise the potential of data, we have to have a very clear vision, and therefore a very explicit brief about what it is we want to enhance. This vision is critical, as without it, we will not be able to take people with us. Much of the task data development is classic change management. Social care knows how to do this, but often the driver for change comes from outside. This needs to be a change from within, driven by a vision of how data will enhance, develop and improve your service offering for people who use your services. NCF has a key role in providing you with some of the narrative for this, with stories of the difference that data can bring, but you will need to own your own vision to facilitate effective change. Neil Madden, from CASS Business School, reiterated to delegates that without that shared vision within organisations, the internal resistance you can experience during implementation can feel like you are running through a brick wall, again and again.......

Joining up the dots

Your own organisational data can always be usefully triangulated with other organisations data. There is real value in using appropriate external sources of data to support predictions, and test assumptions. However, for many organisations, the challenge they have is triangulating their own internal data. With a myriad of sources of data that just don't talk to each other, the opportunities for gathering data on either the whole organisation, or the whole person in need of services are severely limited. The thrust of the speakers who were maximising the potential of data was on its capability to determine a very personalised service for individuals. This involved understanding the whole picture – data on the lived environment, data on personnel and service interventions and data on individual health and care. All these individual sources of data were of course useful, but the real power came from pulling them together to really get the picture on what was improving or reducing the impact of the care and support people received. We must work together to challenge software suppliers across the sector to enable their software to talk to each other. Those more technical than I will understand the mechanism for this, but I understand enough to know that it is possible. NCF will be working with our partners to come up with some clear messages for suppliers, and to equip you with the knowledge of what to procure when you next face the 'beauty contest' of choosing software suppliers.

Getting the measure of the data we need

The advice at the event was to start small. We had some excellent examples of how providers are already providing regularised data to Evalucom, who are pulling that together across London and providing the information back in benchmarking to both the commissioners and the providers. This data is helping providers to streamline their information provision to regulators and commissioners and critically is driving change in service delivery. There is a really significant, but tangible challenge for providers, commissioners, regulators and those who use services to work out what data is going to make the change. There are, of course, vast numbers of differential data that can be collected and used – but let's get our heads together to sort out what is mission critical to the enhancement of the provision of quality care.

My final challenge is how to make good the offers of support that were flowing yesterday. From Skills for Care, software providers, Digital Catapult, IBM Watson and more… The outside world recognises that social care can be transformed by data, it is up to us now to raise our head up to make the changes we need to bring the vision to reality.

Just for fun – I will leave you with another vision - me and my new best friend – Pepper.