Moving past backlogs: how can a focus on data help to ensure equitable access to services?

Emerging insights

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This deck shares emerging insights and learning from Q's insight project 'Moving past backlogs: how can a focus on data help to ensure equitable access to services?'

The project started in June 2022 and will finish in October 2022.

About Q's insight work

Q is a community of thousands of people across the UK and Ireland, collaborating to improve the safety and quality of health and care. We share our knowledge and support each other to tackle challenges. Together, we make faster progress to change health and care for the better.

Through our insight work, we tap into the rich knowledge and diverse experiences of the Q community. We surface stories and generate and share actionable insight. This insight can be used by members and others across the health and care system to help them deliver improvement work more effectively.
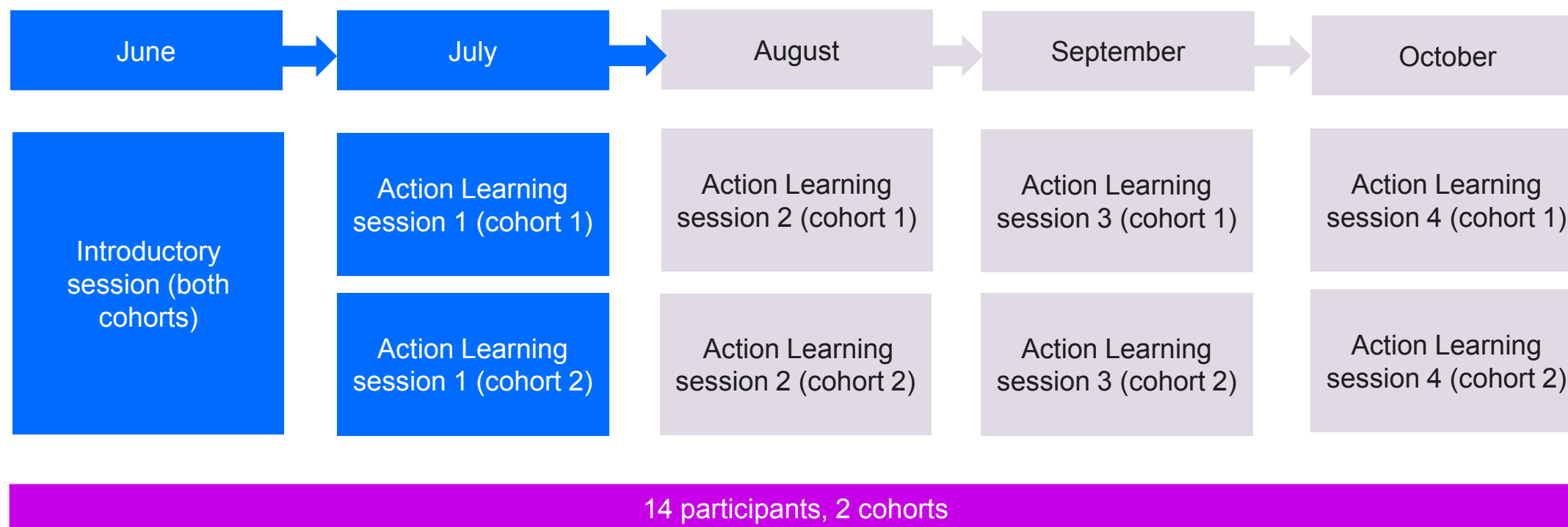
Collaboration is at the heart of what we do. To ensure the greatest impact in our work, we aim to involve members at all stages and, where possible, collaborate with others working on the same topic.

We use a variety of systematic methods to draw out the diverse experience and expertise of Q members relating to system priority areas. These include member surveys, workshops, case studies to amplify members' work and ongoing share and learn projects.

Find out more about our insight work.

About the project

This project builds on learning from our previous insight project. We are using Action Learning to provide members with an opportunity to explore live challenges and issues with a group of peers in a safe space, while also sharing their insights and learning with others. We want to create a space to help people have difficult conversations and think differently about the challenges and what's needed to address them in order to progress with this work.

June	July	August	September	October
Introductory session (both cohorts)	Action Learning session 1 (cohort 1)	Action Learning session 2 (cohort 1)	Action Learning session 3 (cohort 1)	Action Learning session 4 (cohort 1)
	Action Learning session 1 (cohort 2)	Action Learning session 2 (cohort 2)	Action Learning session 3 (cohort 2)	Action Learning session 4 (cohort 2)

14 participants, 2 cohorts

About the project: participants

Who are our participants?
We are working with 14 Q members, in two cohorts. They are from different levels of the system, and their work considers different:

- angles on inequality
- types of data (both qualitative and quantitative)
- backlog issues.

This approach has already allowed us to explore several angles to this topic including:

- how these challenges play out for the individuals leading this work
- the conscious process of acknowledging your own context, history, socio-cultural background
- the operational and programme management context to change ways of working and transform how decisions are made at a local system level
- meeting top-down and bottom-up actions and priorities.

How we talk about this work is important

The words 'data', 'inequalities' and 'backlogs' mean different things to different people. Even among our 14 Q member participants, there are varied interpretations.

Data	Inequalities	Backlogs
• Voices of lived experience • Uncovering/discovering • Knowledge • Insight and storytelling • Recorded data points that can be turned into insight • Big data, that can show the right place to look and where to dig deeper • Multiple data sets, not necessarily complete • Data can help to illustrate challenges in a system, and be a powerful tool for showing if something is working	• Inequality is diversity and will require different lenses • No one size fits all: nuance and complexity • Ethnic minority groups having poorer outcomes • Systematic differences between social groups • Different experiences • People not accessing services because they don't think they will be seen • It's easy to talk about health inequalities as one thing but it is very complicated, it is a very diverse group of people	• People waiting to be seen • Waiting list exceeds capacity to meet demand • Patients that have not yet presented, but we know are "missing" diagnosis • Are there other/better ways for us to work? • Anyone who has delayed treatment beyond a national metric • Clinical harm hard to determine - people haven't been seen or come forward • Missing the target for early diagnosis

What have we heard so far?

Emerging insights: how can a focus on data help to ensure equitable access to services?

Theme 1: The current focus on inequalities can be a 'golden thread' through improvement work

- There is a sense of momentum, and signs of change in the way people are thinking and acting to address inequalities.
- There are competing priorities (including addressing backlogs, delivering service transformation, and deciding which inequalities to prioritise). But the context is creating an opportunity for addressing inequalities to be the 'golden thread' through all work. In England, the national framework for addressing health inequalities aims to drive targeted action. We've also heard from our participants that:
  - Across the system, there is a focus on population health, and more curiosity to learn from population health management approaches.
  - Operational changes in England have prompted shifts in local areas. This should lead to more consistent ways of working, commissioning and decision making.
  - It's more important than ever to prioritise where to focus efforts: there are limited resources available and increasing demands on services.

'There are lots of organisations working on this. It feels like there is a sense of urgency and like people are really willing to be collaborative and go above and beyond to learn from one another.'

Theme 2: Navigating the implications and choices made based on quality of data

- We've heard a consistent concern about access to quality data. The data that is available – both qualitative and quantitative – is imperfect or flawed because:
  - important information is often missing
  - the nuances of individual experience are not conveyed well
  - qualitative data and data from community organisations is under-used
  - data is not consistently and accurately recorded
  - busy people are expected to collect data
  - the systems to record and export data are incompatible and clunky.
- Working with imperfect or flawed data impacts the choices that people make. We've heard that participants are fearful and anxious about making inaccurate, homogenised assumptions based on data that's available to them. This undermines their confidence and leads them to question their ability to make analytical judgements or to understand issues from other people's perspectives.

'One thing I find frustrating is the inelegance of data. What we tend to do, or what data tends to do (particularly around ethnicity data) doesn't capture the nuances and the intersectionality of what we need to know. And it leads us to make some lazy assumptions about people […] it hides important things that sit behind the data.'

Theme 2: Navigating the implications and choices made based on quality of data

Questions we'll continue to explore:

- Should teams start work with imperfect data and then involve people that can help challenge assumptions and deepen their understanding as work?

- Or should teams invest time upfront to improve the data, so they are more confident of their starting point?

'The data is still missing in terms of what are the challenges that [this group] face.'

Theme 3: Turning data into insight and moving to action

- Our participants are interested in how to turn quality data into insight. They recognise that it is not just about having data but the conversations that data sparks.
- This needs people:
  - with time, capabilities and (qualitative and quantitative) data literacy to explore and ask questions of the data
  - to make analytical assessments
  - to know when to collaborate and explore different experiences and build understanding.
- Insight then needs to become action. What we're hearing suggests that while quality data is vital, when it comes to action, it isn't necessarily the most important issue. The surrounding culture has an influence, including how:
  - decisions are made about what to prioritise/de-prioritise and who is involved
  - change is perceived and received
  - to challenge existing behaviours and ways of working
  - to coordinate action at a local system level rather than within team or organisational silos.

'There's a risk that people see data on paper and miss the point about what sits behind it: the trauma, very poor experience. It's about treating stories and experiences with respect.'

Theme 3: Turning data into insight and moving to action

- This suggests a need to focus efforts not just on the data, but on learning cultures where there is openness and transparency. This could be achieved by:
  - sharing data even when it doesn't show the service in a positive light
  - a culture where people are open to hear what isn't working
  - enabling people to learn from others outside their usual networks.
- This needs both top-down and bottom-up change, which can be a tricky balance to strike.

'Some people will see data as the answer to everything. But just knowing the numbers isn't the answer. You have to actually engage with people, to know more about what the issue is.'

What next?

We will continue to work with the two cohorts of 14 Q members over the next few months to explore some of these challenges.

Look out for the next instalment of our emerging insights in September.

'Not so long ago, and we would have been happy with 85% spread or uptake… I don't think we really realised that it was always the same 15% you were missing… It's great that now we're starting to look at the 15% first.'

Get in touch

Has this resonated with you? Do you have any challenges to what we've shared? Email us and share your thoughts.

Thank you

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