

**BEING ACCOUNTABLE: VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS,
GOVERNMENT AGENCIES AND CONTRACTED
SOCIAL SERVICES IN NEW ZEALAND
BY JO CRIBB**

INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES, WELLINGTON

Ann Pomeroy
Manager Interface Facilitation
Local Government and Community Branch
The Department of Internal Affairs Te Tari Taiwhenua

Being Accountable focuses on the accountability of service providers in the not-for-profit sector in New Zealand. It is based on the research Jo Cribb undertook for her doctoral thesis at Victoria University of Wellington. The book is an exploration and analysis of voluntary sector managers' and board members' views of accountability, and it suggests useful ways to improve the relationship between government agencies and not-for-profit service providers.

The not-for-profit sector is a major deliverer of social services in this country, so questions about the accountability of the sector's service providers, how this is managed and measured, and the sector's own views on this subject are vitally important.

I found this book to be an excellent and enlightening read, as well as a very useful summary of issues the sector and contractors have been advocating for decades. As Cribb rightly points out in the preface, ensuring good provider performance doesn't lie in the contract documents but in the relationships and practices used to generate and monitor the contracts. However, I might add that since Cribb undertook her study the development of results-based (integrated) contracts (described on page 21) is proving to be a helpful tool for making non-government organisation service provider performance more transparent.

In Chapter 2 there is a useful summary of the information available about the voluntary sector in New Zealand, which provides a valuable context for Cribb's analysis. One omission, which would have added value to the discussion here, is any further exploration of the importance or otherwise of the status of the people delivering services for community and voluntary organisations. Whether a service is delivered by a volunteer or by a paid employee may well be relevant to a discussion about accountability, and it wasn't clear at this point in the book whether voluntary organisations (organisations that have a governance structure made up of volunteers) that utilise paid staff to deliver their services have different views on, or a different

approach to, accountability compared to organisations that use volunteers (some of whom may be salaried professionals or retired professionals) to deliver services. However, the case study material later in the book shows there is a difference between organisations that rely solely on volunteers and those that use paid professionals, and, anyway, Cribb's exploration of contracting issues focuses on a broader level of accountability.

Chapter 3 defines accountability within the contracting framework and explores the way the relationships between principal and agent in a contract arrangement have been discussed in the literature. I found this analysis to be one of the highlights of the book. Cribb also explores accountability in relationships where the agent has voluntarily chosen to undertake work. Accountability to clients/the community is as important as accountability to taxpayers in a government-funded service. Attention is paid to the issues and tensions that arise when an organisation is accountable to a multiplicity of different stakeholders.

Thesis work tends to make black-and-white distinctions, which blur in reality. Nevertheless I found it helpful to have catalogued the characteristics of "answerability" in a contract or "hard" accountability relationship and "responsiveness" in a voluntary or "soft" accountability relationship. It was also useful to be reminded that people bring a range of perspectives and assumptions to establishing and managing provider-funder relationships. These assumptions will have a major impact on the effectiveness of the relationship in achieving the objectives of both parties (or of multiple stakeholders).

The final section of Chapter 3 discusses the different applications of accountability. Financial accountability is very familiar, but perhaps less so are process accountability (following correct procedures), programme accountability (quality of the work), prioritising (relevance of the work undertaken), and identifying consequences, not to mention compliance accountability, maintenance of professional standards, and accountability to paid staff.

Having developed an excellent context for her work, Cribb uses Chapters 4 to 7 to describe the research she undertook to explore questions not addressed (or not addressed well) in the literature. These were: to whom are voluntary organisations accountable, for what, and why? Cribb bases her analysis of these questions on information from four case studies, which provide a matrix of four scenarios covering high/low government funding and high/low dependence on volunteers.

In the final chapters of the book Cribb uses her research findings to analyse and explore the reality of government-funded service provision by not-for-profit providers. Of particular interest is the exploration of the tension providers face in accepting funding

to deliver specific government programmes and using those funds to achieve positive outcomes for clients. Cribb's research clearly shows that these are not necessarily the same thing. The perceived reluctance of some officials to engage more closely and effectively with providers, in the interests of improving services received by clients, is a telling point.

Cribb argues that current relationships between funders and providers are structured on the premise of principal–agency theory, in which funders focus on controlling and directing providers. Her research clearly shows that a more effective relationship would be built if funders saw themselves as stewards and worked with providers in a collaborative framework using soft accountability management mechanisms.

I found the exploration of the pitfalls and positives of a collaborative approach to contracting an exciting confirmation of the success this approach is having under Funding for Outcomes integrated contracts.¹ The cross-government collaborative funder–provider approach of results-based contracting, with its focus on questions such as “Are clients better off?” rather than the more traditional “How much did we do?” is a good starting point for addressing the challenge posed in Cribb's book.

1 See Ann Pomeroy (2007) “Changing the Culture of Contracting: Funding for Outcomes” *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*, 31:158–169.