

## TRAINING AND SUPPORT

### CENI training themes still vital for voluntary/community organisations in the face of tough economic times

CENI's recent research report, 'Measuring Up', pointed to increased evidence of the need for investment from both voluntary and community sector organisations and funders to strengthen the use of evaluation tools and techniques in order to improve accountability and learning at both project and programme level. In particular, the report highlighted the need for capacity building support to understand and evidence outcomes.

The use of quality standards is also increasingly important as organisations seek to demonstrate that they are fit for purpose, particularly in an environment where they are competing in tendering processes to deliver services.

CENI's research findings have informed a strategic change of approach in its training support provision within the sector this year. This shift

seeks a balance between direct delivery of training to voluntary/community groups with more focused work with funders, including providing support on specific funding programmes.

As a result, we have taken the decision not to deliver an open training programme over this forthcoming year - although we will monitor and review the needs emerging from the sector at this challenging time, on an on-going basis.

We continue, however, to deliver short-term customised training to voluntary/community groups on the themes of quality, self-evaluation and measuring outcomes. These themes remain critically important for organisations, which is borne out in the following examples of training and support delivered by CENI over the past six months.

#### BIG Lottery's Reaching Communities

NICVA commissioned CENI to deliver specialist support on 'Evaluation Outcomes from Your Project' to groups funded under BIG's Reaching Communities Programme.

This support was part of NICVA's management development programme funded by BIG for its Reaching Communities funded groups. BIG is an "outcomes focused funder" which means that it is important for the organisations it funds to understand outcomes concepts and to utilise monitoring and evaluation processes which enable them to better measure and report on outcomes achieved. In addition to one-day group training sessions, CENI provided follow-up workshops with some funded groups and one-to-one consultancy support to tackle specific issues that groups may encounter in implementing outcomes monitoring and self-evaluation.

Feedback from training stated: *"We have just received funding and this training was very useful - especially the example of an outcomes framework and sample questionnaires."*

Feedback from the one-one support stated: *"It helped just to go through some of our ideas around evaluation and discuss what might work well in our setting."*

#### Aware NI

We provided a one day training session for the Management Staff Team of Aware NI (formerly Aware, Defeat, Depression) to support the implementation of the PQASSO Quality System within the organisation.

Feedback from the session stated *"this is excellent training and great to have available in-house."*

Furthermore, it was expressed that this had not only improved knowledge amongst staff about the quality system, but that the organisation had subsequently begun to implement it and introduce new systems which will ultimately improve quality for the organisation and its service users.

#### Southern Childcare Partnership

CENI provided Self-evaluation Training for Early Years providers within the southern area.

Two full-day sessions were delivered to 20 people. CENI tailored the session to reflect the needs of this sector relating to ETI quality assurance guidelines and regulatory requirements as well as communicating key good practice messages relating to the use of self-evaluation within service delivery.

Feedback suggests that the training was 'very useful' and offered much needed support, particularly for community based groups wishing to continuously improve the quality of their services through the use of self-evaluation tools and techniques.

Comments included: *"I found ways of gathering information and using it very interesting and beneficial."*

*"This type of training should be more readily available."*

#### Want to Know More?

If you would like to find out more about CENI's customised training you can visit our website: [www.ceni.org](http://www.ceni.org) or contact Gladys Swanton, CENI Training Manager on 028 9024 8005 to discuss any specific training requirements you may have.

## Evidencing the Impact of the Community and Voluntary Sector



Attending the Making Reporting More Effective seminar are (from L-R): Maeve Walls, Director, VCU; Maurice Meehan, CENI Chair; Roy McGivern, VCU; Brendan McDonnell, Director, CENI; Steven Marwick, Director, Evaluation Support Scotland and Paddy Sloan, CENI board member.

### CENI Hosts First of Seminar Series

Over the coming year, CENI will be hosting a series of seminars on the theme of 'Evidencing the Impact of the Community and Voluntary Sector'. This follows publication of the CENI 'Measuring Up' research report earlier this year, which highlighted some fundamental challenges for both funders and organisations in relation to evidence gathering and reporting in the current financial climate.

The first in the series, 'Making Reporting More Effective', focussed on the importance of generating and reporting meaningful information to help decision-making and learning. This was attended by over

50 participants from across the sector and its funders. The event drew on the particular experience of the Scotland Funders' Forum (SFF), and the work of their 'Harmonising Reporting Working Group' to produce guidelines and practical steps that funders can take to make reporting more effective and less burdensome.

Guest speaker Steven Marwick, Director of Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS) presented the key findings of the SFF study.

Commenting on the day, CENI Director, Brendan McDonnell said:

*"Today's event has provided an important opportunity for funders and funded organisations to share experiences, discuss*

*the current challenges in relation to reporting, and how the Scottish approach could be applied here. CENI is committed to supporting the sector to agree on practical steps to move things forward and improve current methods in order to make reporting easier and more useful for everyone involved. Today's event has started that process and it is vital that we continue the debate. We look forward to building on today's learning and will be holding discussions in the near future with DSD and other independent funders on how this can be moved forward."*

Also speaking at the event were Brendan McDonnell, Director, CENI; Maeve Walls, Director, VCU, Department for Social Development; and Frances McCandless, Chief Executive, Charity Commission for NI.

# Making Reporting More Effective

## Research by CENI and others shows that current systems for monitoring, evaluation and reporting are clearly not working.

Multiple demands from various funders requesting the same information in different formats often impose an unnecessary burden on funded organisations. At the same time, funders do not always get what they need from the reports they receive from funded organisations. Reporting does not always give them a clear picture of the difference their funding has made or the lessons learned. However, it doesn't have to be like this and a recent research project initiated by the Scotland Funders' Forum demonstrated a practical approach to tackle this problem.

In June, CENI invited Steven Marwick, Director of Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS) to present the findings of the Scotland Funders' Forum (SFF) 'Harmonising Reporting Working Group'. The seminar, attended by over 50 representatives from both funders and funded community and voluntary organisations, was very well received.

The SFF report identified five broad areas of work where funders (and funded organisations) could take action to make reporting more useful.

- 1 Harmonising how we report - forms and format
- 2 Harmonising what goes in the report - content
- 3 Harmonising language - keeping it simple!
- 4 Supporting reporting - capacity building and guidance
- 5 Financial reporting

The SFF believes that if funders adopt the conclusions and good practice recommendations in the report, and if funded organisations also take on board their recommendations for them, reporting will become more effective and less burdensome for all parties.

Following the presentation at the CENI seminar, participants engaged in a series of round table discussions. While the feedback from these discussions identified similar concerns with current approaches to reporting, monitoring and evaluation, there was a very positive response to the Scottish approach and a real appetite from both funders and organisations to see this approach applied in a Northern Ireland context.

The main points emerging from the CENI seminar were:

- Reporting should not just be a one way process of extraction, but should be mutually beneficial to both funders and projects.
- Communication is critical – it is important funders and funded organisations understand each other's needs and be able to communicate what information is needed and why.
- Sharing of information is important to build trust, engender ownership and ensure information is actually used.
- What is needed is less emphasis on individual project inspections and more focus on outcomes at both project and programme level.



Therefore, to improve reporting we need to address the issue of outcomes:

- Outcomes need to be built in from the start – funding programmes and funded projects need to plan for outcomes.
- Programme funders need to communicate and agree outcomes with individual projects from the start as part of contract negotiations.
- Funders and projects need to understand and use appropriate methods to collect, analyse and report on outcomes information.
- Both funders and projects need training and support to build appropriate skills in monitoring, evaluation and reporting.

It was agreed that applying the learning from the Scottish approach to Northern Ireland will require a significant change in the current approach to design and operation of reporting systems.

- This process of change needs to be led, managed and supported, especially by government funders.
- It is important all key stakeholders are involved in the change process including representatives of funders from central, local government, independents and trusts as well as the community and voluntary sector.
- The emerging Concordat could reflect a commitment to the principles and guidance for good reporting.

## Next Steps

Subsequently, CENI was invited to the Government/Voluntary Sector Joint Forum meeting in July to make a presentation on the SFF report and the feedback from the June seminar.

This was very well received and CENI has since met again with VCU to discuss how the learning from the Scottish approach could be brought forward. It was agreed to pilot the process, by focusing initially on one organisation and its current range of funders in order to assess the potential to develop a more joined up approach to reporting. This pilot will be initiated as soon as possible with the intention of reporting by end of the current financial year.

The current budgetary crisis, while posing a real threat to investment in the short term, also provides an impetus to tackle some of these fundamental issues in relation to evidence gathering and reporting. Doing so now will help prepare the sector and its funders to become more efficient, effective and sustainable in future. This would also produce savings for the public purse in terms of reducing unnecessary bureaucracy and duplication.

## MEASURING CHANGE: A NEW APPROACH



Following on from our first seminar in June on 'Making Reporting More Effective', CENI is delighted to announce the second in its series of seminars entitled 'Measuring Change: A New Approach' which takes place on 26 October 2010. This focuses on the all important issue of outcomes and in particular the development of an innovative approach to measuring the impact of funding programmes at a community level.

The budgetary crisis has re-focused Government's emphasis on evidencing the outcomes of its funding to the voluntary and community sector. However, as CENI's recent research report 'Measuring Up' shows, evaluation practice is still primarily focused on counting activities rather than demonstrating results, which makes it difficult to show the difference that funding actually makes.

What is needed is a new approach which shifts the focus from activities to results, and which involves both funders and funded organisations in the evaluation process.

Based on previous research to measure 'Social Assets' CENI has developed and tested a robust and cost effective approach to address this challenge. The 'Change Matrix' approach:

- Uses a rigorous methodology to assess the degree of change produced by funded interventions in communities;
- Involves both funders and funded organisations in the process of defining and measuring change;
- Generates useful data to assess both project outcomes and demonstrate programme impact and;
- Is relatively low cost.

The seminar will demonstrate the approach and present case studies, including the evaluation of the DSD Areas at Risk Programme, which show how it has worked in practice to provide both funders and funded organisations with useful information to evidence change and inform decision making.