Community Evaluation Northern Ireland – CENI
Response to NI Programme for Government framework consultation
July 2016

Summary

Community Evaluation NI (CENI) is the evaluation champion and infrastructure body for the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. We also manage the Inspiring Impact NI programme, part of a UK-wide initiative which promotes impact practice across both the VCSE and public sectors.

CENI believes that an outcomes-based system of government, if properly implemented, can bring considerable advantages in terms of improving decision making, collaboration, resource allocation and demonstrating public benefit. Our response focusses on the implications of implementing an outcomes approach within programmes directed at the VCSE sector, rather than on the specific content of the multifaceted, population level outcomes.

CENI raises three key points:

- We welcome the idea of population level outcomes. However, our research highlights the challenges associated with **implementing an outcomes approach** at the programme level and we look forward to contributing to future consultation around action plans.

- We have a concern that a **primary focus on OBA™** may result in a narrowing of understanding about how desired change is defined and measured. This could lead to over simplifying complex social problems and so risk excluding valuable contributions made by locally based community organisations to the PfG outcomes.

- It will, therefore, be important to incorporate a range of **complementary evaluation methods** to reflect and protect the important impact of VCSE organisations on individuals and communities.

CENI would welcome an opportunity to meet you to elaborate on our response and share:

- Specific examples of how we are already supporting Government and the VCSE sector to prepare for and implement an outcomes approach.

- The resources developed by CENI and by Inspiring Impact to facilitate funders and VCSEs in planning for outcomes.

- The range of robust models developed by CENI and others, which can be drawn upon to support collaborative working on outcomes between diverse stakeholders.

- The transferable learning from a series of Inspiring Impact demonstration projects in the public sector and VCSE sector.

- The innovative approaches which CENI has developed and used to capture qualitative and hard-to-measure outcomes for major funding programmes.

Detailed response

Community Evaluation NI (CENI) is the evaluation champion and infrastructure body for the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. We help VCSEs plan, measure and communicate their impact; we also support funders to evidence the impact of their programmes and so inform more strategic investment in the VCSE sector. CENI also manages the Inspiring Impact programme sponsored by the Building Change Trust with support from the Department for Communities.

CENI believes that an outcomes-based system of government, if properly implemented, can bring considerable advantages in terms of improving decision making, collaboration, resource allocation and demonstrating public benefit.

With over two decades of inter-sector working in the field of evaluation, CENI has developed a unique appreciation of the contexts, drivers and challenges experienced by statutory bodies, funders and the VCSE sector. This equips us with both the cultural understanding and the technical expertise to provide some insight to the challenges associated with introducing an outcomes approach. Our response focusses on the implications of implementing an outcomes approach within programmes directed at the VCSE sector, rather than on the specific content of the multifaceted, population level outcomes.

Below, we set out three key points and offer our support in finding ways forward.

1.   Implementing an outcomes approach at programme and project levels

Recent research[i] commissioned by Inspiring Impact found that public sector funders were unclear about what an outcomes approach would mean in practice, in particular, how current programme design, appraisal and monitoring systems would adapt given the prevailing emphasis on financial regulation and compliance. Areas for consideration were:

- **Resourcing outcomes**   New forms of partnership working and interdepartmental budget agreements will be required across government to deliver PfG outcomes. In addition, new collaborative arrangements between public, private and VCSE sectors will be needed to support co-design and co-deliver outcomes-based programmes.

- **Capacity for outcomes** The public and VCSE sectors will need a shared understanding of outcomes and of their respective roles in delivering outcomes-based government and funding programmes. This means ensuring that the people who design and deliver programmes have a broad understanding of outcomes and the techniques available.

- **Funding assessment and compliance** Consideration is needed about how existing systems for assessment and appraisal, and the requirement for SMART targets, may act as a barriers to planning for outcomes through co-design and other approaches.

- **Procurement** There are questions about how the rules for public procurement and commissioning can accommodate more collaborative, co-design processes and address issues of full cost recovery.

The Inspiring Impact report makes a number of recommendations for addressing these issues under three headings: preparing people; adjusting systems and; sharing learning from demonstration projects and exemplars.

2. Focus on a single methodology

The approach taken in this PfG Framework draws on the techniques set out by Mark Friedman in his book 'Trying Hard is Not Good Enough'. However, focussing on a single methodology to define and capture outcomes data has been shown to be problematic, particularly with respect to the complex and diverse social issues being addressed by VCSE programmes.

Studies of OBA™ in practice illustrate the problems of relying on a model that prioritises quantities over qualities.[ii] These become real risks at the Performance Accountability level where public services are delivered through financial support to the VCSE sector.

Under OBA™, VCSE service providers are required to report their contribution to PfG outcomes (i.e. population level) using 'Performance Measures'. These are numeric - 'How much did we do?' and 'How well did we do?' - the first being reported as an integer and the latter as a percentage. It is this primacy of numbers over nature, especially when associated with Payment by Results that creates distortions and risks.[iii]

There is growing evidence from practice research (see references below) which demonstrates how chasing numbers can divert organisational energy away from understanding the complex dynamics and nature of people served, the quality of practice, and actual outcomes as experienced by individuals. There is also evidence of gamesmanship and 'milking the middle' - practices which exclude the hard-to-reach and embed inequality.

At the extreme, the long term risk is that the VCSE sector ceases to be independent and innovative in responding to need, and becomes both driven and restrained by 'feeding the numbers'; a practice which ultimately exposes front line services, sector skills and infrastructure, equality, effectiveness and efficiency to risk.

It is essential that the VCSE sector gets the space and support it needs independently to develop practice, reach new people, innovate and evaluate.

3. Complementary evaluation methods

Given some of the challenges described above, we emphasise the need for a pluralistic approach to evaluation. This means adopting a range of methods appropriate to particular needs and contexts. In this way, it becomes possible to capture more fully the impact of locally-based community organisations on individuals and communities, as well their contribution to PfG outcomes.

In particular gathering information about what practices work for hard-to-reach communities or small, intensive-support-needs groups is essential, both in its own right and as contextual knowledge for achieving PfG outcomes and future 'Performance Measures'.

There are proven methods, both quantitative and qualitative, for capturing the hard to measure outcomes of community and voluntary activity. These include CENI's 'Measuring

Change' approach,[iv] which has been successfully used to evaluate multi-million pound funding programmes for the Big Lottery Fund[v] and DARD[vi].

What CENI can offer

CENI can draw on its recent work to inform thinking about how some of these challenges may be addressed:

- We can share specific examples of how we are already supporting Government and the VCSE sector to prepare for and implement an outcomes approach.

- We can explain the models developed by CENI and others, which can be drawn upon to support collaborative working on outcomes between diverse stakeholders.

- We can demonstrate the resources developed by CENI and by Inspiring Impact to facilitate funders and VCSEs in planning for outcomes, including the recently launched 'Measuring Up for Funders'.

- We can share the transferable learning from a series of Inspiring Impact demonstration projects in the public sector and VCSE sector.

- We can demonstrate the innovative approaches that CENI has developed and used to capture qualitative and hard-to-measure outcomes for major funding programmes.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to elaborate on our response, share our experience and provide specific examples of how we are successfully supporting components of Government and the VCSE sector to better prepare for an outcomes approach.

[i] Inspiring Impact NI (2016) Embracing Change: Public sector readiness for outcomes-based funding. https://inspiringimpactni.files.wordpress.com/2016/04/embracing-change-iini-scoping-study-june-2016.pdf

[ii] Lowe, T. and Wilson, R. (2015) Playing the Game of Outcomes-based Performance Management. Is Gamesmanship Inevitable? Evidence from Theory and Practice. *Social Policy & Administration.* Newcastle. KITE.   DOI: 10.1111/spol.12205

Keevers, L., Treleaven, L., Backhouse,H., C. & Darcy, M. (2010) *Practising social justice. measuring what matters: Locally-based community organisations & social inclusion.* Jambero NSW. Illawarra Forum Inc. http://illawarraforum.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/PSJ_final_2010.pdf

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[iii] National Audit Office, (2015) *Outcome-based payment schemes: government's use of payment by results.* London. NAO https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Outcome-based-payment-schemes-governments-use-of-payment-by-results.pdf

[iv]CENI, (2013) *Measuring Change - An approach to outcomes for the voluntary and community sector.* Belfast, CENI. http://ceni.org/sites/default/files/13593%20Measuring%20Change%20Text9.pdf

[v] CENI (2014) *Big Lottery Fund Measuring Change Project Briefing Paper.* Belfast, CENI.
http://ceni.org/sites/default/files/briefing%20paper%20pdf%20NEW5.pdf

[vi] CENI. (2016) *Social Impact Assessment Of DARD's Rural Community Development Support Service 2012-2016,* Belfast, CENI.