Response to NI Programme for Government consultation
December 2016

Summary blurb

There is huge merit in having an overarching outcomes framework to set the direction for all of Government (as demonstrated by Scotland and others). This is not without its challenges, however, and demands flexibility and adaptability when selecting measures and methodologies. Those who design, deliver and appraise programmes must work together and select from a range of suitable and appropriate approaches and not be confined to one perceived silver bullet. Effective performance measurement therefore necessitates wider understanding of the principles of co-design and of evidencing and accounting for outcomes if it is to achieve the genuine change articulated in this PfG.

Detailed Response

An outcomes-based system of government for NI is a very positive and progressive step. There is huge merit in having an overarching outcomes framework to set the direction for all of Government (as demonstrated by both Scotland and others). The adoption of OBA™ as the mandated methodology could potentially provide a discipline and structure currently lacking at a departmental level to capture some population level outcomes.

However, while this discipline and structure may be important in terms of defining and measuring population change, when it comes to the performance level, that is, at a programme or project funding level, **flexibility** on indicators and **adaptability** of methodology will be essential if an outcomes approach is to work in a genuine and meaningful way.

We see a couple of key issues here:

 (1) the relevance and range of numeric indicators identified in the PfG and
 (2) the proposed ubiquity of OBA as a measurement method at the performance level.

(1) Beginning with indicators, the PfG focus at the population level is on quantitative measures primarily using existing data sources. The issue for many VCSE programmes and organisations, however, is that they are delivering developmental change, which is often more qualitative in nature, or producing changes that may not be readily aligned with the existing PfG indicators. There are signs of encouragement in some Delivery Plans where we are seeing some emphasis being placed on qualitative and more difficult to measure data, though this is not the case across the board. The Delivery Plan for Indicator # 1 for example refers to 'collective efficacy' and other ways of addressing and capturing change. It will be important to know the degree of **flexibility** with the existing indicator set to accommodate and give weight to qualitative data. This is what will provide a more accurate and balanced picture than mere statistically oriented proxy indicators.

With this in mind, the big challenge will be to translate the population level framework and corresponding delivery plans into outcomes focused programmes and projects at the performance level that can reflect a balance of quantitative and qualitative approaches to addressing social problems and measuring progress/change.

(2) We therefore would also question the ubiquity of using OBA™ at a performance level across VCSE programmes and organisations. In our experience there are some issues regarding the strict application of OBA™ in particular situations. This raises the question of whether it is possible to **adapt** the methodology to ensure the parity of qualitative data in terms of demonstrating change and making a difference? It is important to recognise the limitations of the numbers, particularly for defining and capturing developmental change that happens in local communities and makes a real difference to people's lives – things like relationship building, social capital, creativity, innovation and the like, which are not so easily reducible to numbers and could easily be lost in the process of aggregation and turning the curve.

We are well versed in the nuances and application of OBA™, which refers to the story behind the numbers in demonstrating change, but the stories need to come up front as well, particularly at a performance accountability level. There will be a need for complementary methods to define and capture the change, particularly developmental change at a community level. It is important that tried and tested complementary methods feature at the performance level and those working at this level are guided and supported in their use. As has been well documented there are **no silver bullets** for impact measurement.

Each of these issues feed into a third key issue:

(3) Preparing Public Sector to manage Outcomes Programming

The management systems that Government funding programmes for the VCSE sector work to are primarily for the purposes of audit and inspection, and while important, these systems do not work to define, capture and demonstrate outcomes. This includes appraisal, commissioning and reporting processes. While systems will need to be adapted to enable good outcomes programme management, it is perhaps of more fundamental importance that the organisational culture of public funders' changes to become more outcomes focussed so that staff has the understanding, capacity and support to implement effective outcomes based approaches to funding. This includes the audit and accounting functions which are hugely influential at programme approval and reporting levels respectively. Current work at the 'performance level' is not getting the guidance and support it needs and there is widespread confusion and concern about adapting to an outcomes approach.

Outcomes are our bread and butter and we have over 20 years of organisational expertise in supporting the Voluntary & Community Sector and its funders to shift towards outcomes thinking. Over the last 12 months in particular we have been working with a range of discreet Government funding programmes to support them for 'outcomes readiness'. We have a wealth of insights and examples highlighting the challenges and opportunities that this new Programme for Government has to offer as it filters down into the operating environment.

If we do not get things right at the performance level then it will be much more difficult to turn curves at the population level. Set-up stage is a critical juncture to getting it right.