



# DELIVERING CHANGE, DEFINING OUTCOMES AND CAPTURING EVIDENCE

WHAT CAN WE LEARN ACROSS THE UK?

Event Report

July 2017



Dr. Ailsa Cook, Alliance Associate, wrote this report.

The Alliance for Useful Evidence welcomes comments, which should be emailed to: [Alliance.4usefulevidence@nesta.org.uk](mailto:Alliance.4usefulevidence@nesta.org.uk)

The paper summarises learning from a seminar hosted by the Alliance for Useful Evidence in May 2017. It was a roundtable discussion on outcomes focused policy across the devolved jurisdictions of UK, involving 18 delegates from across the UK.

[The Alliance for Useful Evidence](#), hosted by [Nesta](#), champions the use of evidence in social policy and practice. We are an open-access network of individuals from across government, universities, charities, business and local authorities in the UK and internationally. The Alliance provides a focal point for advancing the evidence agenda, developing a collective voice, whilst aiding collaboration and knowledge sharing, through debate and discussion.

We are funded by the BIG Lottery Fund, the Economic and Social Research Council and Nesta. Anyone can join the Alliance network at no cost. To sign up please visit: <http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/join/>

# CONTENTS

1 Introduction	4
2 Focusing on Outcomes Across the UK	4
3 Themes from Roundtable Discussion	6
Evidence for outcomes-based approaches	7
Outcomes as a tool to signal what is important	7
Linking population with personal outcomes	7
Outcomes, improvement and collaboration	8
Measurement and attribution	8
4 Final Reflections	9

# Introduction

Across the UK, outcomes based approaches have been developed to meet diverse public service reform priorities, including: improving partnership working; ensuring public services are efficient and focussed on what matters to people and communities; driving innovation and improvement; and enhancing accountability across the system. The approaches taken to conceptualising and implementing outcomes focuses have varied across the four devolved administrations. On the 18<sup>th</sup> May 2017, the Alliance for Useful Evidence brought together senior civil servants and thought leaders to examine these different approaches and share learning. The event was held in Cardiff and included presentations from:

- Sophie Howe, Future Generations Commissioner for Wales
- Roger Halliday, Chief Statistician of the Scottish Government
- Linda Devlin, Executive Office, Northern Ireland.

These were followed by a roundtable discussion involving 18 delegates from across the UK. This short report summarises the learning from this event. The first section outlines key features of the different UK approaches as presented at the roundtable event. The report then discusses some of the learning and messages from the wider discussion.

## Focusing on Outcomes across the UK

### Wales

Whilst the concept of outcomes has been operationalised in Wales for some time, for example through Local Outcome Agreements (see Law J. (2013)<sup>1</sup> for an evaluation), it was the introduction of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act in 2015<sup>2</sup> that brought outcomes centre stage. The purpose of the Act is to ensure that the national bodies in Wales promote wellbeing and act sustainably, which is defined as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The Act seeks to encourage: planning for the long term; a focus on prevention; integrated decision making; collaboration within and beyond public services and involvement of people in decisions.

The Commissioner described the work that had been done to present the vision for the future in a way that is meaningful to the population, articulating the “Wales We Want”, centred around

---

<sup>1</sup> Law J (2013) Do Outcomes Based Approaches to Service Delivery Work

<sup>2</sup> Guide to the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act

<http://gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/150623-guide-to-the-fg-act-en.pdf>

seven wellbeing goals. A measurement framework of 46 indicators, against which data is collected at a national level, supports this<sup>3</sup>.

These indicators build on existing data and it is recognised that delivering improvements against these indicators will not by itself meet the wellbeing goals. In addition, there needs to be ongoing reform of government and public service structures to promote the collaborative, preventative and inclusive ways of working that underpin the Act.

## Scotland

Outcomes have been at the centre of public services in Scotland for more than 10 years. In 2007, a minority SNP government introduced the concept of outcomes to unite the parties around a shared set of priorities. The approach developed in Scotland built on work internationally<sup>4</sup> and was the product of an alignment of thinking between the SNP government and senior civil servants at the time. The administration moved quickly to use an outcomes approach to reconfigure government structures around key outcomes and to create a new relationship between local and national government, based on locally determined outcome agreements.

The progress made towards outcomes has been captured through the National Performance Framework of 16 outcomes and 55 indicators<sup>5</sup>. These outcomes and indicators have been developed and refined in partnership with relevant agencies and often are underpinned by logic models. Reports on progress towards these outcomes are publicly available on the [Scotland Performs Website](#). The development and implementation of an outcomes approach in Scotland has been influenced by the widespread use of Improvement Science Approaches, which have provided new approaches to using data and evidence for service improvement.

As with Wales, the Scottish Approach to Public Service Reform, as articulated by the Christie Commission, recognises the importance of collaboration, prevention, involvement and co-production<sup>6</sup>. The National Performance Framework is currently under review and there is a concern to promote bottom up public service reform and make sure the Framework is measuring the right things.

## Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has embraced an outcomes approach enthusiastically over the past couple of years. Outcomes are seen as an important tool in enabling the mandatory coalition to function effectively by making explicit a shared purpose for government that transcends party politics. In

---

<sup>3</sup> Future Generations Act Wellbeing Goals and National Indicators <http://gov.wales/topics/people-and-communities/people/future-generations-act/national-indicators/?lang=en>

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Virginia Performs <http://vaperforms.virginia.gov/>

<sup>5</sup> Scotland Performs <http://www.gov.scot/About/Performance/scotPerforms>

<sup>6</sup> Christie Report on the Future of Public Services in Scotland (2011) <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2011/06/27154527/0>

particular, Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) has been embraced by a number of public and third sector organisations and heavily informed the 2016-2021 Draft Programme for Government<sup>7</sup>, which has the aim of “improving wellbeing for all by tackling disadvantage, and driving economic growth”. The framework was developed based on widespread engagement with the public. This led to the identification of 14 high level outcomes, supported by 42 indicators and 43 measures.

The Northern Irish approach is at a very early stage and has been stalled by the lack of a functioning administration since talks broke down between the two governing parties in January 2017. There have also been challenges in operationalising an essentially collaborative process in a very siloed political and administrative system. Nonetheless, there is a lot of enthusiasm for the approach and people are hopeful that this is a mechanism that can help address long standing issues. Meanwhile, the approach has already been adopted by other agencies and bodies for their own use, such as the [Equalities Commission](#).

## England

Whilst there was no presentation from an English perspective, participants noted that outcomes based approaches were introduced by the Blair New Labour Government which was informed by OBA. This focus on outcomes has been operationalised in the form of outcomes based agreements between local and national government and a growing focus on payment by results, as advocated in the Open Public Services White paper<sup>8</sup>.

# Themes from Roundtable Discussion

The three presentations prompted a wide-ranging discussion amongst participants, chaired by Sophie Howe. The key themes explored through this discussion are summarised below.

---

<sup>7</sup> Northern Ireland Draft Programme for Government 2016-2021

<https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/programme-government?platform=hootsuite>

<sup>8</sup> Westminster Open Public Services White Paper

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/open-public-services-white-paper>

## Evidence for outcomes-based approaches

The relationship between outcomes based approaches and evidence was a theme that emerged time and again through the discussions. Participants noted that whilst there was some evidence about the implementation and impact of outcomes based approaches across public services, there were also gaps and inconsistencies. It is not possible to discern from the evidence whether and how best to implement outcomes based approaches. Indeed, participants cited different studies that had reached very different conclusions as to whether OBA type outcome approaches help or hinder public services. The need for more evidence to understand the benefits and drawbacks of such approaches was highlighted.

Participants also highlighted their challenges in drawing upon an evidence base more widely in implementing outcomes based approaches, for example in understanding what kinds of initiatives might help improve outcomes. The siloed nature of evidence production as well as the fact that much research does not address questions that policy makers need to answer were identified as barriers to evidence use. These issues echo findings from previous work by the Alliance for Useful Evidence.<sup>9</sup>

Participants described a range of theoretical and conceptual frameworks used to guide their work in the absence of formal evidence, including those around: human rights; wellbeing; public management and place based approaches.

## Outcomes as a tool to signal what is important

As already highlighted, all three administrations emphasised the important role an outcomes approach plays in signalling what the government is seeking to achieve to national bodies, local government, partners and the population. The outcomes frameworks in all three jurisdictions have been developed in consultation with the public and are expressed in terms that are meaningful to citizens and communities. There was a broad sense amongst participants that the administrations had been successful in this work. Not only is there significant overlap between the outcomes frameworks, but participants highlighted that they also fit well with other measures of wellbeing, such as those used by Happy City<sup>10</sup> and What Works Wellbeing<sup>11</sup>.

## Linking population with personal outcomes

A key challenge in implementing outcomes approaches is making the link between personal and population outcomes. The experience in Scotland shows that whilst the population outcomes reflect closely what people using services report what matters to them, top down approaches to measure population outcomes can undermine local efforts to improve personal outcomes (Miller

---

<sup>9</sup> Alliance for Useful Evidence (2016). Using Evidence, What Works.

<http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/publication/using-evidence-what-works-april-2016/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.happycity.org.uk/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/>

and Barrie (2016)<sup>12</sup>. For example, practitioners have reported that requirements to collect national performance data can get in the way of them having a 'good conversation' with the people they support. Participants reflected that this picture was familiar across the UK, with a tendency for implementation to get stuck in what one person called the "concrete middle". Participants identified the considerable pressures middle managers were under when implementing outcomes approaches, challenged to think differently about service delivery, be joined up, but also accountable using different forms of measures from those that they are familiar with. It is important that managers get support to ensure that they develop approaches that support new ways of working and engage with complexity.

## Outcomes, improvement and collaboration

Outcomes based approaches can help drive improvement by focussing agencies on shared objectives. In this way, they highlight the need for collaboration and can help foster this. However, as one participant said, outcomes approaches do not create collaboration by themselves and talk needs to be linked to action. Where outcomes approaches are being implemented in siloed contexts, significant effort is required to change the culture and bureaucracy to enable shared accountability for outcomes. The importance of leadership, good evidence, understanding and buy in across the organisation were all highlighted as necessary to embed an outcomes approach.

## Measurement and attribution

All three administrations highlighted that their current approaches to outcome measurement were limited and heavily influenced by the availability of robust population data. There was lively debate during the seminar about whether it is indeed possible or meaningful to measure outcomes and attribute outcomes to programmes of activity delivered in complex systems. There was discussion about the purpose of outcome measurement. Participants recognised both the potential for outcomes based performance regimes to lead to unintended consequences, such as gaming, and the value of outcomes data for learning, decision making and public accountability. A key message emerging from the discussions was that it was not just what you did in relation to measurement, but also how you did it that was key. Organisations were actively capturing learning about which indicators and measures worked best for their intended purposes.

---

<sup>12</sup> Miller and Barrie (2016) Personal Outcomes: Learning from the Meaningful and Measurable Project <http://ihub.scot/media/1139/po-learning.pdf>

# Final Reflections

Whilst the four jurisdictions of the UK are at different stages in developing and embedding their outcomes approaches, they are facing common challenges. Coming out of the seminar there was not a sense that there was a right or wrong answer. Instead, effective implementation is an ongoing process of balancing top down and bottom up imperatives and the concerns of government, populations and public service partners.

Nowhere is this need for balance more acute than when seeking to measure outcomes. The current measurement regimes are all driven by the availability of pre-existing data. All administrations accept that this is only part of the picture and that these measures by themselves do not drive improvement across the system, and at times, can get in the way. There was a clear appetite at the seminar for more meaningful approaches to using and reporting data that capture more of the nuance and complexity required to work in partnership to improve outcomes for communities. Given the synergies between the different regimes, there is significant potential to share learning as more meaningful approaches to outcome measurement, monitoring and evaluation are developed.



Nesta is a global innovation foundation. We back new ideas to tackle the big challenges of our time, making use of our knowledge, networks, funding and skills. We work in partnership with others, including governments, businesses and charities. We are a UK charity that works all over the world, supported by a financial endowment. To find out more visit [www.nesta.org.uk](http://www.nesta.org.uk)

Nesta is a registered charity in England and Wales 1144091 and Scotland SC042833.

