

Perspectives on Practice: 'What will the outcome of Outcomes-Based Accountability be for Northern Ireland's arts and cultural organisations?'

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Abstract: *Prior to its collapse, the Executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly was about to sign off a new Programme for Government (PfG). A fundamental change to previous government planning is the adoption of an Outcomes-based Accountability® or OBA approach to measurement, developed by Mark Friedman (1). The process of developing and implementing this new process has encountered a number of problems and some would argue is flawed in its approach. This has led to much confusion in government, and between government and the voluntary and cultural sectors, in particular around co-design, one of its underpinning principles. In this, the Irish Journal of Arts Management and Cultural Policy's first piece for 'Perspectives in Practice', Margaret Henry attempts to unpick some of the pitfalls and challenges of this approach. She considers what this approach is and means for the arts and cultural sector strategically, operationally, and as a fundamental planning and evaluation tool for the future. Since 2015, Henry has been part of the Arts Collaboration Network, an informal voluntary group of cultural organisations working with Community Evaluation Northern Ireland on how the cultural sector might respond to this new approach through adopting a 'Theory of Change' model of impact planning. In this article, she draws on her most recent work as CEO of Thrive to look at how the organisation has grappled with introducing a Theory of Change approach.*

Keywords: Impact; Outcomes; Accountability; Strategic planning

Background to the introduction of Outcomes-Based Accountability®

An Outcomes-Based Accountability (OBA®) approach is very new to Northern Ireland and is being driven by both the Northern Ireland Assembly (2) and the 11 local councils that make up our government framework. Although the Northern Ireland Assembly is currently not sitting, before it collapsed it had drafted a new Northern Ireland Programme for Government (PfG). The Programme for Government is the highest-level strategic document of the Executive – setting out the priorities that it will pursue in the current Assembly mandate, and the most significant actions it will take to address them. This PfG cannot be fully implemented until the Assembly returns and the Northern Ireland Executive (3) is in place. In the interim, the Executive Office (4) within the Northern Ireland Civil Service has produced an outcomes delivery plan for 2018/19 (5) that contains actions that can give effect to the overall aspiration of the Northern Ireland Executive of improving societal well-being.

At local government level there are 11 councils, each of which has produced a Community Plan (6). These community plans had to be produced as part of local government reform which took place in Northern Ireland in 2015, merging councils to create 11 from 26 and giving local authorities much more powers over aspects like planning and economic development. As with the draft PfG, these community plans all have a series of outcomes that aim to make lives better for the people who live, work and visit each council district. Although the draft Programme has yet to be approved, all community plan outcomes link back to the outcomes within the draft PfG. This then is a period in which stopgap measures are being put in place for what will be a long term, outcomes-based planning process.

This is a change in approach at national and local government level. The Northern Ireland Executive wished to implement this outcomes-based accountability framework having seen it work in Scotland and other countries. That said, the approach used in Scotland and elsewhere is not exactly the same as the approach being taken in Northern Ireland. It is unclear whether or not that will create additional problems or impact on its effectiveness for the region.

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Defining Outcomes-Based Accountability

Outcomes-Based Accountability (also known as Results-Based Accountability and RBA in some parts of the world) is a disciplined way of thinking and taking action that communities can use to improve the lives their community. OBA is also used by organisations to improve the performance of their programmes. Key to its success is data – getting and using the right data to make decisions about how services, projects and programmes are delivered and showing what difference these make to people’s lives. It operates at a country-wide level but can also be used as a way for organisations to show how much they have been doing, how well and what difference they are making to delivering their own outcomes.

By bringing this approach into Northern Ireland at national and local government level there is a commitment to focus on the actual difference services make, not just the outputs of numbers they deliver. The principle is that it is better to work with 10 people and really effect a change in their well-being, than with 500 people and create little or no change.

OBA versus Impact Practice

This move has created much discussion amongst organisations that are in partnership with national and local government and receiving funding for organisations, services, projects, and programmes. The voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland has raised concerns that the OBA approach may not fully capture the difference they are making to people, and could replace one form of counting things with another. In order to meet some of those concerns, the Inspiring Impact NI (7) project was set up and has been running in Northern Ireland alongside the introduction of OBA. This project aims to encourage organisations to think about why they do what they do, i.e., their purpose, and to use the impact cycle of Plan, Do, Assess, and Review.

The difference between OBA and impact practice is that the former is a measurement tool that helps evidence what difference you are making, and the latter is a way of working – a process encompassing the activities that an organisation does to focus on its impact. This includes planning desired impact, planning how to measure it, collecting information about it, making sense of that information, communicating it, and learning from it. This distinction is important because it is easy to get confused. It is also true to say that whatever process and tools you use, there is no silver bullet for evidencing impact. One of the key frameworks within the Inspiring Impact approach is the ‘Theory of Change’.

Defining ‘Theory of Change’ and co-design

The model of ‘Theory of Change’ is a way to help you describe the need you are trying to address, the changes you want to make (outcomes), and what you plan to do (activities). The approach can be used for any organisation – from service-delivery charities, cultural producing and presenting organisations, to campaigning organisations, to funders. Impact practice is not a replacement for OBA but can and is being used across many organisations to ensure a culture of always learning and evaluation, and making sure that whatever you do is contributing to your overall purpose and the difference you are trying to make.

The illustration below is from Community Evaluation NI and shows the constituent parts of Theory of Change and how they work together. It is a disarmingly simply diagram, but when you try to make this work for your organisation it requires much thought, debate and discussion before agreeing outcomes and actions (8).

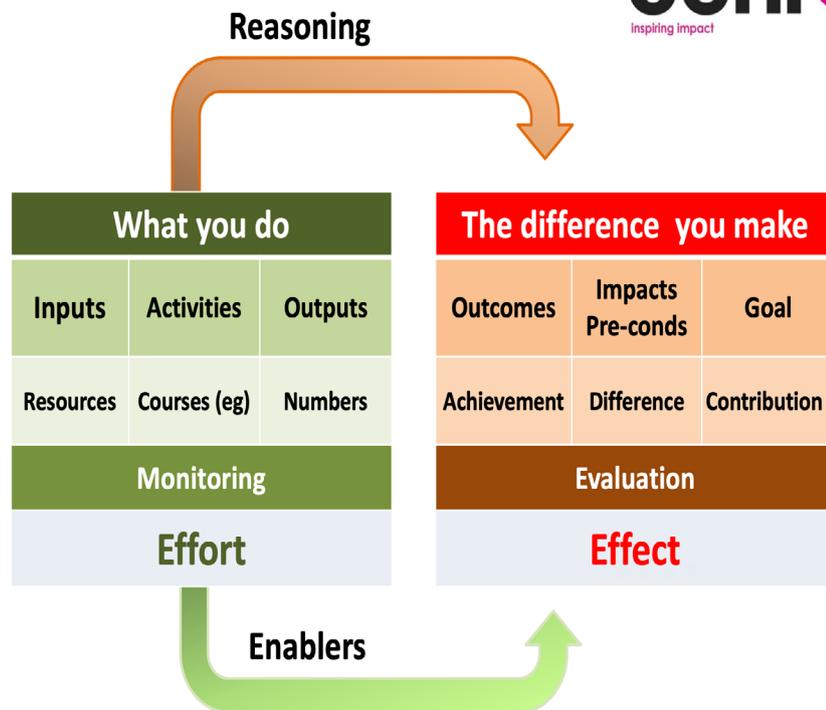


Figure 1: 'Theory of Change'. Credit: Community Evaluation NI

In addition to focussing on outcomes and impact, the Northern Ireland Civil Service and local council staff are being encouraged to embrace the principles and practice of co-design. Co-design is an approach to design attempting to actively involve all stakeholders (e.g., employees, partners, customers, citizens, end users) in the design process to help ensure the result meets their needs and is usable. Many voluntary and community organisations, including cultural organisations, have been using co-design or similar to develop services and programmes of work for years. The concept of co-design places the people who want to help at the heart of development; however, it has rarely involved key funders and stakeholders, and even more rarely been used by government departments to develop policy and practice. This change in approach will require a shift in mind set from everyone involved, but arguably the biggest culture change needs to be within government departments themselves, and how they carry out their jobs.

How will OBA affect the cultural sector in Northern Ireland?

OBA will also affect the cultural sector as an area with a working and funding relationship with the Northern Ireland executive and local government. The draft Northern Ireland PfG has 12 outcomes and 49 indicators. Within that, no outcomes and only one indicator refer specifically to arts and culture (9). This throws up two issues. First, there is a lack of recognition around the ongoing and future contribution of the cultural sector to areas such as health and well-being, conflict resolution, tourism, and quality of life. During the public consultation period of the draft PfG, the case was made that arts and cultural activity contributes to a

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number of identified PfG outcomes, especially those listed below:

- We have a more equal society
- We enjoy long, healthy, active lives
- We are an innovative, creative society where people can fulfil their potential
- We are a shared, welcoming and confident society that respects diversity
- We have created a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest
- We give our children and young people the best start in life

It is vital that the cultural sector can show the very real contribution made in different areas of civic life in Northern Ireland. The cultural sector needs to advocate to government and the civil service to help address this huge and potentially dangerous gap.

Second, organisations must remember that the PfG outcomes and indicators are for the population as a whole. Therefore, individual cultural organisations must work out what contribution it can make to these population-wide outcomes, but they cannot and should not take big population measures as their indicator of success. To place the responsibility of delivering a population increase in engagement in arts and culture at the door of every cultural organisation is not feasible. Cultural organisations make a *contribution* to this population measure, but each organisation does that in its own way. For example, for some theatre companies, producing high quality theatre for children is their way of contributing to this outcome and that is where their efforts on planning, doing, assessing, and reviewing this activity should be focussed.

Lessons from Thrive

My own organisation, Thrive, has been working with Theory of Change and OBA in different ways (10). As part of a group of cultural support organisations in Northern Ireland, Thrive Audience Development has worked collaboratively in the development and implementation of impact practice and the Theory of Change across our own organisations. The Arts Collaboration Network (ACN) is an informal collective of support organisations working in the arts sector in Northern Ireland. This group involved Arts & Business NI, Theatre NI, Dance Resource Base, Voluntary Arts Ireland and my own organisation.

Over a period of 8 months supported by Inspiring Impact NI, this group worked to understand the Theory of Change approach and how it could help us as CEOs/Directors understand our individual organisations. Doing this collaboratively facilitated the opportunity to assess how clear and relevant our organisational purposes were. It is invaluable to have different pairs of eyes challenge assumptions and reasoning behind intended outcomes, as well as prompt discussion of different ways of evidencing our work and the difference it makes. It was hard work at times and there is always a

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danger of over-thinking, but ultimately this approach provided clarity and strength which in uncertain times is very useful.

Having been able to design and implement a 'Theory of Change' for our own organisations, this group has also helped to support the organisations they work with every day to understand and use the Theory of Change as a strategic planning tool and a way to think about evidencing the impact of their work. This fits with our remit as supporting organisations that exist to help cultural organisations across a range of areas, from diversifying fundraising, to enhancing audience experience, professional development and advocacy. The cascade effect of our learning has included formal and informal training and webinars, as well as providing online guides and resources for our partners and members.

A recurring theme emerging from this work is around evidence: what do you need to know, how you collect it, and what you do with it? Through our work in Thrive, we see many organisations trying very hard to ensure that their audience evidence is being gathered. Beyond ticketing and box office information, people are developing creative and innovative ways to hear from audiences and participants about what has worked and what has not. The key here though is how that information is then used. If you are using a Theory of Change or OBA approach you need to link the evidence gathered back to your outcomes, but that's not always easy, requiring that luxury of time and space to think.

If, like Thrive, you are a support organisation, how do you evidence the difference made simply by answering queries from organisations via email or phone, who just need a bit of advice around audience development? How do you quantify the value and impact of attending a conference and bringing back new thinking to disseminate to the sector through our website and free resources? Gathering evidence is also difficult if you are producing or presenting art. Reducing the experience of someone in an audience to a few survey questions is not what the arts are about: this is part of the story, but never the full story. The full story often won't be fully realised until long after the performance has finished.

To illustrate how this change in assessing impact affects our work with organisations, Thrive is currently working on a pilot programme in partnership with Community Evaluation NI to help clarify and align outcomes across government departments, local councils and local arts groups, using as a real example, the Community Festivals Fund (11). This annual fund comes from the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland and is distributed to local councils who often add to the fund, and subsequently design and deliver a festival funding package to mostly small community-based organisations across Northern Ireland. It is a fund that is very much welcomed and used especially in more rural areas. We've been working with staff from the department, local councils and the groups themselves, using the principles of co-design and Theory of Change. This project has revealed that, despite a comprehensive policy framework and guidance being in place, there was a lack of clarity at all levels about what exactly this fund was achieving; which outcomes each part of the chain was responsible for; and how those outcomes could be effectively evidenced by the department, councils, and the groups themselves (which were often volunteer-led). Bringing these people together in a room (or series of rooms) has been a revelation for everyone. The conversations and discussions have helped everyone involved to move closer to agreement and clarity and to see their part in the bigger picture. Everyone has learnt more about the Theory of Change and outcomes-based planning in a way that works for them, and by the time the project completes in early 2019, the aim is that everyone will know what they are trying

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to do, why, and how they can show what they are achieving in a way that works for them. This pilot is therefore developing a process that could be used across different programmes across government and local authority funders, and the organisations that partner with them to deliver cultural activity.

Considerations and Challenges Ahead

There are many things to consider and challenges to come as OBA and impact practice roll out across the Northern Irish cultural sector. Whether organisations wish to use these tools and processes for their own development, or whether these become (as is likely) specific requirements of grants from the public purse, it is clear their adoption will become more widespread. Nevertheless, what are the pros and cons of this shift, and how can cultural organisations avoid being swamped with more onerous measurement requirements that add to workload rather than supporting development?

In my view, using a framework like Theory of Change and/or a tool like OBA, and embedding a culture of impact within organisations, helps maintain focus on intended achievements, and away from unrealistic expectations concerning the big population outcomes within a document like the draft PfG. In times of austerity it is easy to chase funding, and find you are drifting from what you intended to do. A Theory of Change helps an organisation to say no to certain opportunities, as much as it helps to know where to put in the effort. It mitigates the mission drift of trying to deliver something that is beyond scope and remit. It also helps to clarify an organisation's contribution to wider societal outcomes.

There is no doubt that we are at the start of a process in Northern Ireland, and until the Assembly and Executive are back up and running it will be a process that buffers rather than reveals. Once it is back, the Northern Ireland Assembly needs to further recognise and acknowledge how and where the work carried out by arts and cultural organisations contributes to a far more diverse range of outcomes and indicators. The Assembly must also ensure that relevant government departments allow for flexibility in accepting different types of evidence, to truly represent the full range of outcomes and benefits individuals experience from attending and participating in arts activity. This needs to happen through working with cultural organisations and using co-design to get these measures right.

Beyond government, funders have a key role to play in this new approach. They too need to work with cultural organisations on agreeing outcomes and how they can be evidenced. Currently most funders still focus on quantitative numbers and countable outputs. Cultural organisations have had to gather evidence for a long time for funders and for sponsors. However, the gathering of that evidence has often felt like an onerous task, and the data gathered seemed to go into a black hole never to be seen again, or never used in a co-ordinated way. Replacing the gathering of one set of information with another is not productive. Instead, funders and organisations will have to collaborate to agree what they are collectively trying to achieve, who is responsible for which outcomes, and how these can be appropriately and proportionally evidenced by the funder, and by those receiving the funding and delivering the work.

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The positives of adopting an impact-driven way of working are clear in terms of maintaining a clear focus on what you do and why you do it. Reviewing your work in an iterative fashion and taking the learning forward is never a bad thing. Collecting and using data to inform those key decisions and developments is something many organisations, including Thrive, advocate and champion. However, this work takes time. Outcomes-based planning or creating a Theory of Change cannot be done in a hurry. Resources needed include space, and possibly expert help and time to consider the key questions that these approaches provoke. Many cultural organisations in Northern Ireland currently do not have this time or space, nor can they afford the training and support needed to at least get started.

Unfortunately at present in Northern Ireland, the on-going and deep cuts to arts funding, coupled with the impasse in government that is stopping key decisions and initiatives happening, are creating a culture of short-term survival. These obstacles directly conflict with looking at outcomes and longer-term impact. It may be upwards of 10 years before OBA and impact practice will be truly implemented and demonstrate their worth in Northern Ireland. That timeframe will surely be affected by the on-going confusion around Brexit and its implications. Therefore Northern Ireland faces a less than ideal scenario for considering how cultural organisations can show their long-term contribution to the wellbeing of its society. In addition, the daily delivery of activity cannot stop while you develop a workable Theory of Change. In any event, it's very difficult to completely dismantle and rebuild something you are still driving every day. The additional pressure of funding cuts and political impasse make this even more difficult.

Working with a Theory of Change and using OBA presents an artistic as well as practical set of challenges to the cultural sector. The artistic vision of an organisation is what drives so much of the work, but what if you discover through the evidence gathered that you need to change that vision, or the way in which it is delivered? Using data and insight to shape creative output is something the cultural sector often finds challenging to adopt. I would argue this is not a threat to artistic integrity but a recognition and valuing of the people for whom the work is being made, presented, and funded. Without a doubt, this is a big cultural shift for how many organisations operate, balancing the need to demonstrate impact, with the imperative of producing high quality and excellent work: ambitions that need to be addressed at all levels within cultural organisations. Such changes to focusing on outcomes and impact are indeed further iterations of what many cultural organisations have already been doing. Our organisation Thrive aims to support others in this process, and we would advocate for more discussion around the issues raised in this article in the months ahead. As one participant in our pilot programme observed, this feels very much like building a plane while flying it: time will tell if the Northern Ireland cultural sector will soar rather than get stuck on the runway.

About the author: Margaret Henry is CEO of thrive, the audience development agency for Northern Ireland. Through her work with thrive, she develops partnerships across the cultural sector, and increases the use of audience development across arts, culture, and heritage. She has extensive strategic marketing and leadership experience and was previously Head of Marketing for BBC Sport and Radio 5live. Margaret recently chaired the Clifton House conversations, facilitated by Community Evaluation NI, to develop an Impact Road Map for the voluntary and community sector across NI.

NOTES

1. Mark Friedman is a speaker, consultant and author of *Trying Hard is Not Good Enough* (Book Surge Publishing, 2009). Friedman founded and directs the Fiscal Policy Studies Institute (FPSI) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He has provided training and consultation on his acclaimed OBA® framework in over 40 US states and countries around the world.
2. The Northern Ireland Assembly is the devolved legislature for Northern Ireland. It is responsible for making laws on transferred matters in Northern Ireland and for scrutinising the work of Ministers and Government Departments.
3. The Northern Ireland Executive is made up of the First Minister, deputy First Minister, two Junior Ministers and eight departmental ministers. Ministers of the Executive are nominated by the political parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly.
4. The Executive Office is a devolved Northern Ireland government department in the Northern Ireland Executive with overall responsibility for the running of the Executive. The Ministers with overall responsibility for the department are the First Minister and deputy First Minister.
5. <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/outcomes-delivery-plan-201819>
6. In April 2015, the reform of Local Government resulted in the creation of 11 new councils. The new councils were given the responsibility of leading the community planning process for their district. Community Planning aims to improve the connection between all the tiers of Government and wider society work through partnership working to jointly deliver better outcomes for everyone. Community plans identify long-term priorities for improving the social, economic and environmental well-being of districts and the people who live there.
7. The Inspiring Impact NI Programme (<https://www.inspiringimpact.org>) is a Northern Ireland-wide initiative that aims to support voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations and their funders to better understand and embrace impact practice. It has been delivered through a partnership with Building Change Trust and Community Evaluation NI.
8. A recent online article in *Arts Professional* ('Sharpening your sense of purpose', 25 October 2018) by Tamara McNeill, Thanasis Spyriadis and Paul Steele demonstrates how 'Theory of Change' is being used by arts organisations as a planning and development tool: <https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/magazine/article/sharpening-your-sense-purpose>
9. Indicator 27 will monitor the percentage of the population engaging in arts/cultural activities: 'PFG 2016-21 Measurement Annex', published 31 May 2018: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/pfg-2016-21-measurement-annex-engaging-arts-cultural-activities>.
10. Thrive Audience Development (formerly Audiences NI) is the audience development agency for the Northern Ireland cultural sector: <http://www.wewillthrive.co.uk>.
11. The Community Festivals Fund was established by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in 2006. Currently, the Fund is linked to the DCAL key priority of enabling the population to enhance their quality of life through participation and engagement in culture, arts and leisure activities. The Fund also provides an opportunity to contribute to the Department's commitment to promote equality and tackle poverty and social exclusion.