

**Community Development
& Health Network**

Impact Practice & Inspiring Impact in Northern Ireland

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 **INSPIRING
IMPACT**

1. Introduction

This is a report by Community Development and Health Network (CDHN) on Inspiring Impact and impact practice in Northern Ireland. The report presents the findings of primary research in the form of informal scoping meetings, a survey and workshops completed by CDHN between January and June 2021. The purpose of the research was to:

- Explore the current usage levels and understanding of impact practice in NI
- Explore how organisations can be further supported to achieve better outcomes and show the full impact of their work
- Review the impact and learning of the Inspiring Impact programme in NI
- Help decide the priorities for Impact Practice and Inspiring Impact in NI

1.1 About CDHN

With over 2,200 members supporting tens of thousands of people, CDHN is NI's leading organisation working to empower communities, improve health and wellbeing and reduce health inequalities. CDHN is committed to excellent impact practice using outcomes frameworks to measure the impact of our programmes. We support our members and practitioners in the use of the Community Development Outcomes Framework (CDOF), our Community Development Reflective Practice Tool and the Building the Community Partnership (BCPP) outcomes framework to place impact practice at the heart of the community and voluntary sector.

1.2 About Inspiring Impact

Inspiring Impact was a UK-wide programme which ran from 2011 to early 2022 to support good impact practice in the charity sector. Inspiring Impact launched in NI in 2014, providing peer learning networks, online resources and grant funding to help the sector understand and articulate the difference they make.

New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) led the programme throughout the nine years, the other final Inspiring Impact partners were Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS), National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), Social Value UK and Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA). The National Lottery Community Fund has been the lead funder for all nine years.

In 2021, NPC commissioned an external evaluation¹ of the Inspiring Impact programme. The findings of this report by CDHN contributed to this UK wide external evaluation. Since the closure of the programme, most of the resources which previously lived on the Inspiring Impact website have been rehomed by NPC² and other partner organisations.

1.3 Inspiring Impact in NI

Inspiring Impact launched in NI in 2014. Phase 1 'Planning for Impact' was a one-year programme with 13 VCSE organisations receiving funding to deliver impact support. Phase 2 was a two-year programme working with seven VCSE organisations and five arts infrastructure organisations. This phase received funding from the Building Change Trust and the Department for Social Development.

In 2018, Inspiring Impact NI became part of the Inspiring Impact UK wide programme with Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI) as the NI partner. The core focus of CENI was to provide impact practice support to the third sector and its funders. CENI also offered additional impact practice support and training to the community and voluntary sector and statutory services beyond the remit of Inspiring Impact. CENI was lead partner until it closed in March 2020 with CDHN taking over for the remainder of the programme. Due to Covid-19, the planned handover from CENI to CDHN did not happen. CDHN had very limited access to the work delivered by CENI during its time as the NI Inspiring Impact partner and to other work CENI delivered. There is currently no other community and voluntary organisation in NI supporting impact practice as their core work³.

¹ Culpitt, Sally & Ellis J (2022) Inspiring Impact End of Programme evaluation and learning report https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/inspiring-impact-evaluation-learning-report?mc_cid=7dc6c257c8&mc_eid=d8daaec94d

² <https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/the-inspiring-impact-programme/>

³ Other community and voluntary organisations deliver impact practice work, but their core focus is a thematic area, e.g., Sported, Supporting Communities, National Children's Bureau (NCB). There are also social enterprises with a focus on social impact e.g. Gauge Impact

1.4 Impact practice in NI

In the early 2010s, the NI Executive increased the use of outcome and impact-based commissioning and funding for third sector organisations. This replaced previous ‘output’ funding models which focused on volume of work completed as opposed to the impact of this work⁴.

The NI Executive committed to using the OBA approach in the Draft Programme for Government (PfG) in 2016. The NI Civil Service maintained OBA during the Executive and Assembly suspension between 2017 and 2020. In the New Decade New Approach (NDNA)⁵ deal, the parties agreed to retain an outcomes-based Programme for Government and the Executive subsequently retained OBA in the Programme for Government Outcomes Framework published for consultation in January 2021⁶. The NDNA states that the PfG should be developed through engagement with civic society and the principles of co-design and co-production must underpin the development of the PfG, budget and strategies.

The OBA approach has defined strategic planning across the public sector in NI since 2016. It currently sits within the PfG policy processes. The NI Executive is unique in locating the framework solely in this planning document, creating confusion about its status. A report by Carnegie UK⁷ noted that during the three-year suspension of the Assembly and Executive, there was no agreed framework and that this created difficulties as the extent to which regional or local government were expected to embrace a different way of working was not clear.

The Executive’s approach for the new PfG 2021 begins with a draft Framework of Outcomes – statements of societal wellbeing. Taken together, they are intended to capture the range of things that people experience and, as research suggests, matters most to people. Carnegie UK has an embedding wellbeing project in NI, their recent report recommends that the Government fully commit to an outcomes-based approach and that the wellbeing outcomes approach is placed on a statutory footing⁸.

In July 2021, the Department of Health published a Future Planning Model for Health in NI that outlines a draft framework for an Integrated Care System Framework. One of the cornerstone themes for the model is the adoption of the outcomes-based approach to improving the health and wellbeing of the NI population, in line with the draft PfG⁹.

In 2018-19, CENI developed an ‘Outcomes Observatory’ to review outcomes practice and assess effects on funding relationships. They held interviews and seminars with the Government and voluntary sector. They found that the implementation of the PfG and its outcomes approach will have a significant impact on the funding relationship between the VCSE sector and its public funders and there is a wide variation in the understanding of standards and practice. Two draft reports were produced that were unfortunately not published before CENI’s closure and are unavailable.

1.5 What is impact practice?

Impact practice is what an organisation does to plan, understand, communicate and improve the difference it makes in the world.

It encompasses **all** the activities an organisation does to focus on impact and learning. It is about learning how an organisation best serves the people it supports. This means planning what difference they want to make, collecting the right information to know if they are achieving their goals, assessing what impact they are having and learning and adapting their work. Inspiring Impact created a **cycle of good impact practice** to define what impact practice is and articulate a clear path to success⁹.

4 NI Assembly RalSE (2021) Outcomes Based Accountability and the Programme for Government http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2017-2022/2021/executive-office/0221.pdf?utm_source=nia1.me&utm_medium=urlshortener

5 New Decade New Approach (2020) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade__a_new_approach.pdf

6 Programme for Government | The Executive Office (executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk)

7 Ormston H., Pennycook L. & Wallace J. (2021), Embedding a Wellbeing Framework in Northern Ireland: A contribution from Carnegie UK Trust to inform discussions around the Programme for Government consultation https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2021/03/04161846/v4-4823-CUKT-EWNI-NI-PfG-consultation.pdf

8 <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations/future-planning-model-targeted-stakeholder-consultation>

9 <https://www.thinknpc.org/starting-to-measure-your-impact/the-cycle-of-good-impact-practice/>

This follows a **four-step** cycle:

Plan

Plan how to create the desired impact

Do

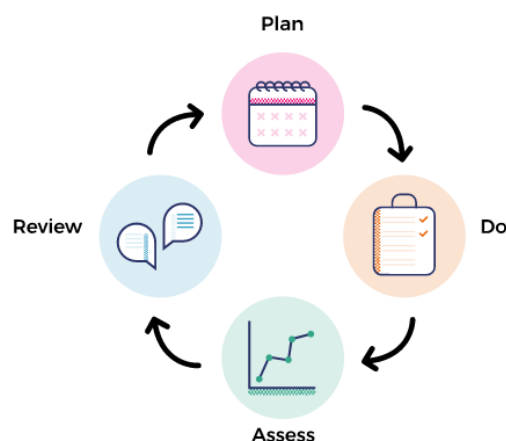
Measure your performance against key goals

Assess

Make sense of the data you collect

Review

Communicate the results and learn how to improve your work



Key Impact Practice terms
Impact practice is all the activities related to your impact.
Impact is the difference an organisation/project makes. These are the broad and/or long-term effects of a project or organisation’s activities, outputs and outcomes.
Activities are things that an organisation or project does or the way it chooses to deliver a project to create its outputs and outcomes and achieve its aims.
Inputs are the resources used for the project e.g. money, equipment, staff, volunteers.
Outputs are products, services or facilities that result from an organisation or project’s activities. These are often expressed quantitatively; for example, number of users, how many sessions they receive and the amount of contact they had with a project.
Outcomes are the differences or change a project or organisation expects to make.
Indicators are the things that an organisation/project needs to measure to find out whether they have made the differences they hoped to make (their outcomes).

The Inspiring Impact programme was ‘tools neutral’, as is the impact practice approach. There are many measurement tools and approaches that can help an organisation or funder gather information relevant for planning and demonstrating impact. However, an error made by many is to rush into adopting a measurement tool without first having a clear plan on what it is they want to measure and why.

The impact practice cycle complements and supports the use of tools and approaches by helping organisations and funders to demystify the outcome measurement landscape and jargon and enabling them to make informed choices regarding selection of those most appropriate to their needs.

1.6 Outcomes-based tools and approaches

Outcomes-based tools, approaches and terms such as outcomes-based practice, commissioning and frameworks are, as the names suggest, driven by outcomes. The focus is on the difference made and the impact of the work, not just the inputs, activities or outputs of processes over which they have more control.

We asked about common approaches and tools in the survey. These are outlined below:

1.6.1 Theory of Change and Logic Models

Theory of Change and Logic Models are commonly used in the VCSE sector across the UK.

Theories of Change have a general and high-level focus and relate to the essence of your plans for making a difference. They focus on connecting your activities to your impact and summarise how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. They are often represented in a diagram or chart but can also be in a narrative format.

Theories of change can support multi-stakeholder development processes such as strategic planning, communication, commissioning, management, evaluation and partnership working¹⁰.

Logic Models give the detail of what you plan to do to make a difference—they draw out the thinking and describe the actions you need to make the change happen. A key concept at the heart of logic modelling is ‘If...Then’. This is the crucial link between the components of any argument. If I do this... then I will get this. If this happens... then that will happen. When you make a statement, you have an end goal in mind and you pick out the activities that are going to make it happen¹¹. There are many types of Logic Model (e.g., Weavers Triangle, Wisconsin Model). Key components include inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts.¹² They have many uses including strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, monitoring and evaluation and both simple and complex interventions.

1.6.2 Outcomes-Based Accountability (OBA)

Outcomes Based Accountability™ (OBA) is a disciplined way of thinking and taking action that service planners and communities can use to design and monitor strategies to improve the lives of children, families and communities and as the basis for commissioning and improving the performance of projects, programmes and services.¹³ OBA seeks to define agreed outcomes for a given population and then drive all work towards progressing these outcomes. The approach works on two distinct levels of accountability.

Population accountability are outcomes of whole populations (e.g., city, county, region, nation). These outcomes are broad and cannot be achieved by a single organisation or service, they can only be delivered through effective partnership working across key stakeholders.¹⁴ Indicators are used to help quantify the achievement of a population outcome and provide an insight into how well we are doing.

Performance accountability are outcomes of specific groups, services, projects or programmes. It relates to how well particular services or projects perform. Each service/project will identify their desired impacts and how these impacts can be delivered and measured. The impact is monitored through report cards which present the impact under the three OBA performance measure questions ‘How much did we do?’, ‘How well did we do it?’ and ‘Is anyone better off?’ Some organisations/projects use the three OBA performance measurement questions as evaluation tools and for developing their outcomes without implementing full OBA.

1.6.3 Social Return on Investment (SROI)

Social Return on Investment (SROI) is a framework that helps organisations to understand and quantify the social, environmental and economic value they are creating. SROI measures change in ways that are relevant to the people or organisations that experience or contribute to it. It tells the story of how change is being created by measuring social, environmental and economic outcomes and uses monetary values to represent them. This enables a ratio of benefits to costs to be calculated. For example, a ratio of 3:1 indicates that an investment of £1 delivers £3 of social value. SROI is about value, rather than money.¹⁵

1.6.4 Community Development Outcomes Framework (CDOF)

CDOF was developed by Community Evaluation NI (CENI) as part of the PHA funded Elevate programme.¹⁶ This is a tool for project leaders to identify the community development outcomes of their work and show how it helps to shift the social factors that hold health inequalities in place. The first iteration was produced in the Transformation of Community Development Work Stream (2018)¹⁷. It is currently being redeveloped.

¹⁰ <https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/creating-your-theory-of-change-npcs-practical-guide/>

¹¹ NHS Midlands and Lancashire Your guide to using logic models https://www.midlandsandlancashirecsu.nhs.uk/images/Logic_Model_Guide_AGA_2262_ARTWORK_FINAL_07.09.16_1.pdf

¹² Evaluation Support Scotland Evaluation Support Guide 1.2 Developing a Logic Model <https://evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/supportguide1.2logicmodelsjul09.pdf>

¹³ <https://davidburnby.co.uk/outcome-based-accountability/>

¹⁴ NCB NI Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) <https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/files/OBA%20Guidance%20-%20Updated%20postO%26I.pdf>

¹⁵ The SROI Network (2012) A guide to Social Return on Investment <https://socialvalueuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/The%20Guide%20to%20Social%20Return%20on%20Investment%202015.pdf>

¹⁶ Elevate is managed by Community Development and Health Network (CDHN)

¹⁷ DoH (2018) Expansion of Community Development Approaches <https://elevateni.org/app/uploads/2019/04/Expansion-of-Community-Development-Approaches-May-2018.pdf>

2. Methodology

The research had a mixed methods approach. The first stage was informal scoping meetings with two large charities and two independent consultants who work in the impact practice field in NI. The consensus from the meetings was that it would be beneficial to complete primary research into this area as there are varying levels of understanding of impact practice in NI and we should get a broader view on how best to take the work forward. The organisations that took part in the informal scoping meetings were known to CDHN as having expertise in the area and were approached for this reason.

An online survey was developed and open for completion for the month of April 2021. CDHN developed an email list of 198 people that we identified may be interested in completing the survey. We did not have access to a CENI contact list. We derived our email list from information that CENI reported to NPC as part of the Inspiring Impact programme and our own knowledge of organisations in NI. We sent a direct email to the contacts and a follow up email two weeks later. The survey was also promoted widely in the CDHN Ezine and CO3 weekly Ezine, as well as in posts on CDHN Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook pages.

A total of 110 respondents completed the survey. Survey respondents were asked if they would like to take part in a follow up workshop to explore the survey findings further. Those who indicated they would like to attend were invited to a choice of two online workshops (3 June and 9 June). In total, 17 people took part in the two workshops. One of the workshop participants from a large regional organisation took part in a follow up informal meeting.

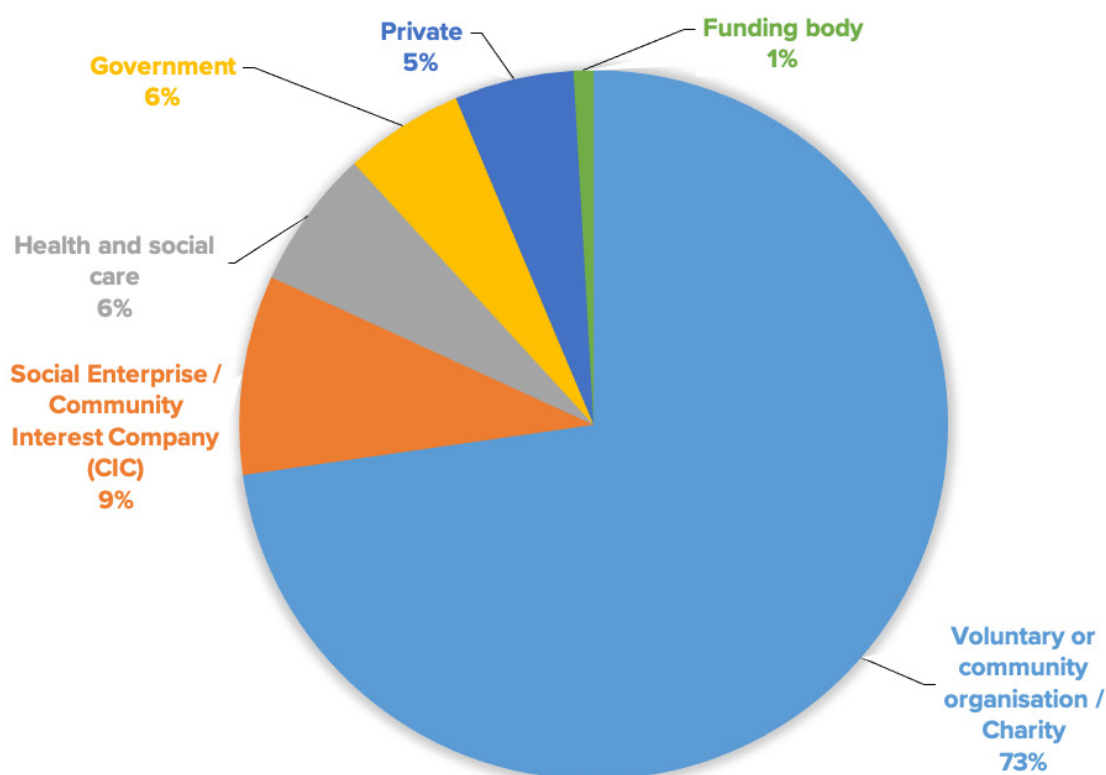
3. Research Findings

3.1 About the survey and workshop respondents

3.1.1 Survey respondents

Almost three quarters of the survey respondents (73%) were from voluntary and community organisations.

Chart 1: What sector do you work/volunteer in?



Source: CDHN II Survey 2021
N=110

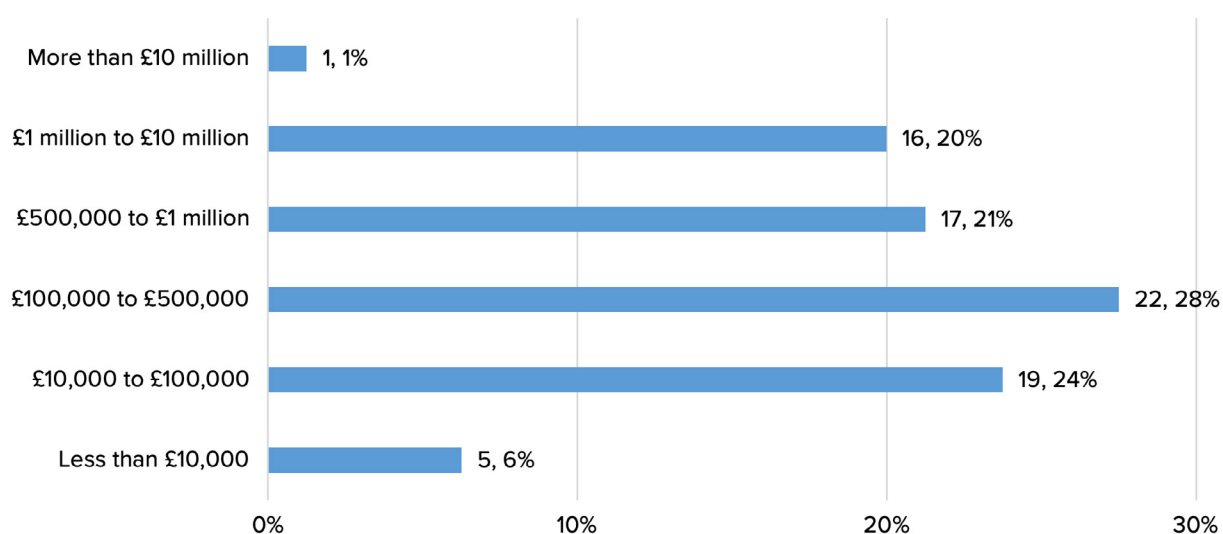
There were 10 responses from social enterprises/community interest companies, 7 from health and social care, 6 from Government, 6 from private organisations and 1 from a funding body (see Chart 1).

One fifth (21%) of Community and Voluntary Sector survey respondents worked primarily in community development, the next highest grouping was health and wellbeing (17%)—see Table 1.

Table 1: Main area of work of C&V organisation	%	N
Community development	21%	18
Health and wellbeing	17%	15
Women	9%	8
Disability/learning difficulty	8%	7
Children and young people	7%	6
Other (please specify)	7%	6
Recreation/sport	6%	5
Mental health	5%	4
Older people	5%	4
Arts/Heritage	3%	3
Education/Training	3%	3
Advocacy/policy	2%	2
Volunteers/volunteer development	2%	2
Advice services	1%	1
Housing and facilities	1%	1
Parents/families/relationships	1%	1
Total	100%	86

In total, 80 respondents knew the annual income of their organisation. The responses were quite mixed as just over a quarter (28%) had an income of £100k to £500k, just under a quarter (24%) had an income of £10,000 to £100,000 and approximately one fifth had an income of £500,000 to £1million and £1million to £10 million. There were also a small number with an income of less than £10,000 and one respondent whose organisation had an income of more than 1 million (see Chart 2).

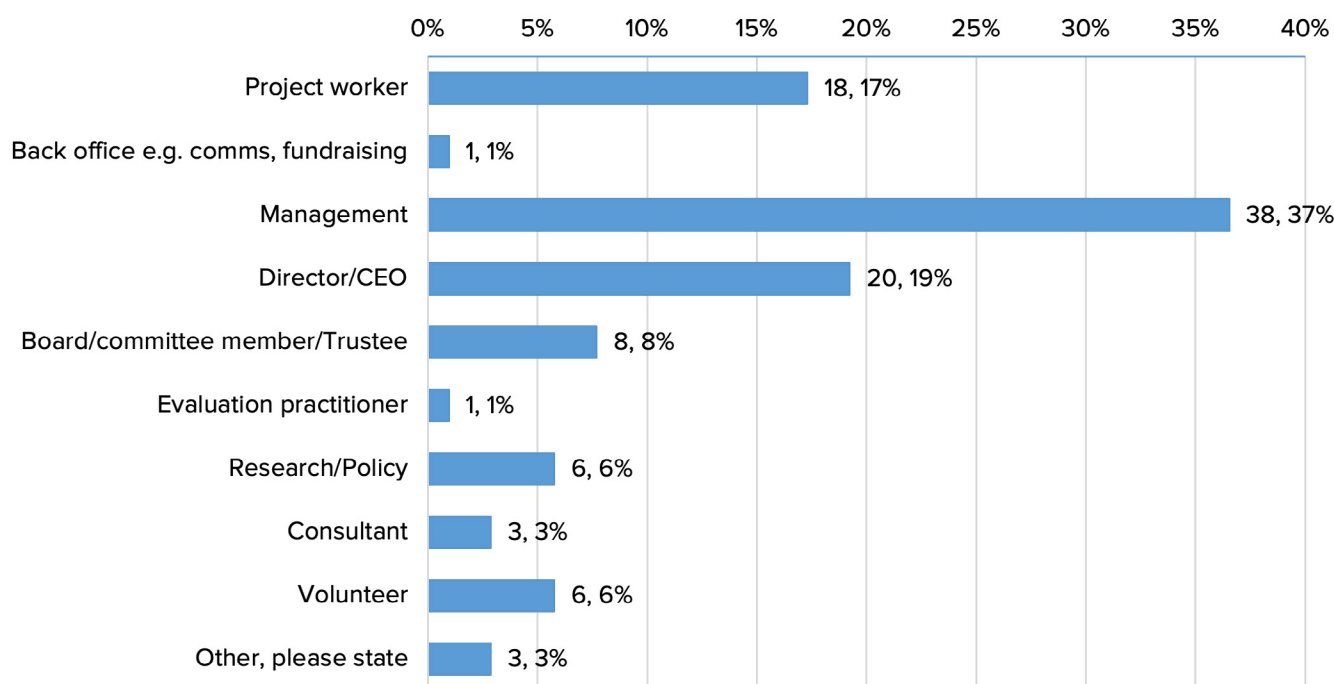
Chart 2: What is the annual income of your organisation?



Source: CDHN II Survey 2021

Chart 3 shows the roles of the respondents in the organisations for which they work/volunteer. Most respondents worked at a senior level either in management (37%) or at Director/CEO level (20%).

Chart 3: What is your role in the organisation you work/volunteer in?



Source: CDHN II Survey
2021 N=104

However, there was a mix of other respondents including project workers (17%), board members (8%) and volunteers (6%).

3.1.2 About the workshop participants

In total, 17 participants took part in the workshops. They were all from the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, with a wide range of representation from global organisations to UK wide, NI wide and local and small community groups. The participants were from a variety of sectors including women, housing, sport, disability, victims, churches and community groups. Participant job roles ranged from CEO to project support workers.

3.1.3 Informal scoping meeting participants

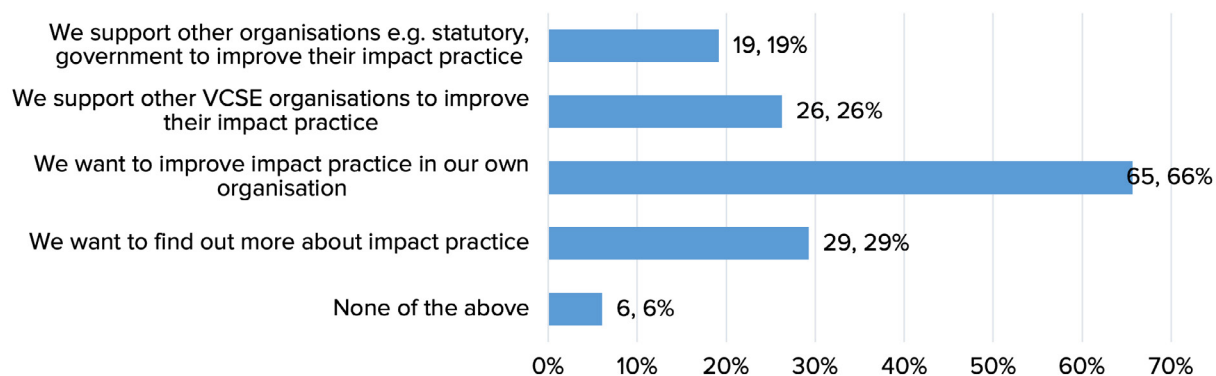
Four informal scoping meetings took place in January 2021 with two independent consultants and two regional VCSE organisations. A further follow up meeting took place in June after the workshops.

3.2 Levels and understanding of impact practice in NI

3.2.1 Interest in impact practice

We asked all survey respondents what their organisation’s interest was in impact practice (see Chart 4). They could tick more than one answer. Two thirds (66%) want to improve impact practice in their own organisations, just over one quarter (26%) support other VCSE organisations with their impact practice and one fifth (19%) support other organisations to improve their impact practice.

Chart 4: What is your organisation’s interest in impact practice? (tick all that apply)

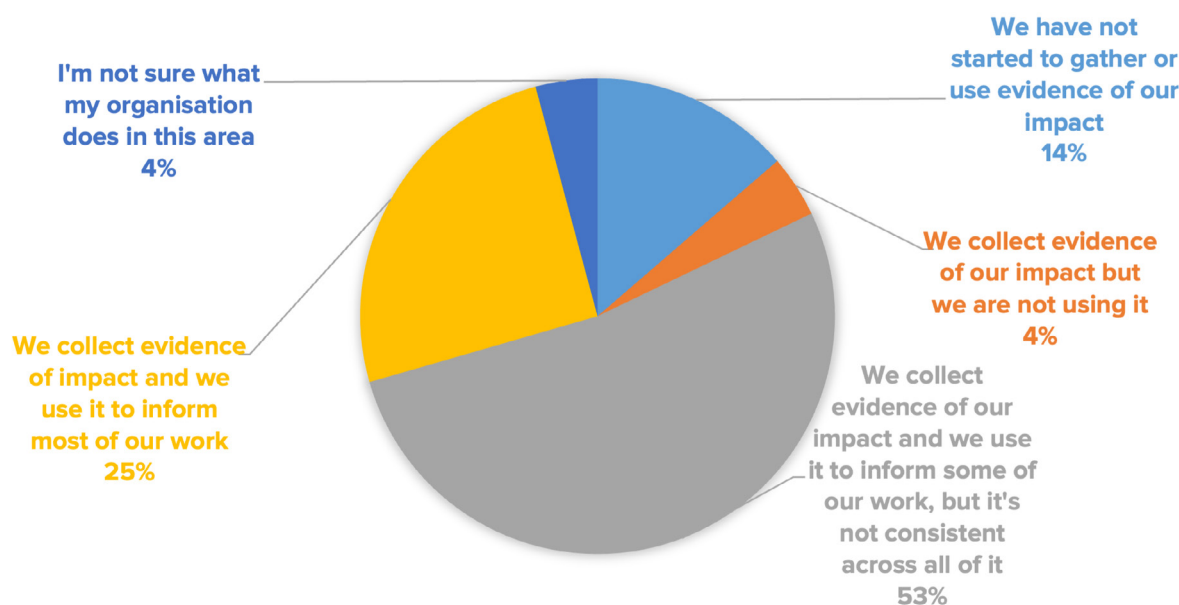


Source: CDHN II Survey 2021

3.2.2 Level of impact practice

We asked respondents to select from five statements about impact practice which best represented their organisation (see Chart 5). Just over half (53%) stated “We collect evidence of our impact and we use it to inform some of our work, but it’s not consistent across all of it”. A further quarter (25%) stated “We collect evidence of impact and we use it to inform most of our work”. Notably however, 14% stated “We have not started to gather or use evidence of our impact.”

Chart 5: to get an idea of the level of impact practice in NI, could you please read the following statements and select the one which best represents your organisation?



Participants commented on the level of understanding of impact practice. There appears to be some organisations that are very well established as is reflected in this quote:

“Within our organisation we carry out a baseline at the beginning of each programme and then continually evaluate it with a formal evaluation at the mid and end point. This is the only way we can be certain that we are having an impact on our local community which allows us to apply for funding to continue this work.” (Manager, Charity, £100k to £500k)

However, there are also those who have not started to gather their impact and need support in this area. This was the case for two of the workshop respondents who came along as they wanted to find out more about impact practice. One explained:

“Even thinking about impact and how we report to funders and those who invest in our work and communicating what is required is just quite new to what we do. I feel like I’ve come late to the party – for us we would be going right back to basics and understanding the models and the processes.” (Workshop participant)

There also appears to be different levels of understanding within the same organisations, one workshop participant explained:

“We are a global charity with a really strong UK presence. At the UK level, there is a really clear logic model – as this moves down to local delivery it’s not so clear. There are different levels of understanding within the team of outcomes. Individual projects are evaluated and have sets of outcomes, but they’re evaluated in very different ways and even the way in which outcomes are interpreted or articulated are very different.”

In the informal scoping interviews, the independent consultants were aware that community and voluntary organisations, particularly the smaller organisations, still struggle with impact practice and need help. It is one of the reasons why their services were being requested.

3.2.3 Understanding of impact practice concepts and terminology

In the workshops and the informal interviews, there was discussion about people’s levels of understanding of impact practice concepts and terminology. Four overarching areas where understanding and knowledge need improvement were highlighted:

Basics about what impact practice is and what the difference is between impact, outcomes and outputs

While this was highlighted as a particular issue for smaller organisations, it was also noted that some large organisations do not fully understand the difference between outputs and impact:

“You get stuck in gathering numbers that don’t necessarily measure impact. We have a programme at the moment that is cited as being very impactful, no pre and post questionnaires and no discussions with participants so I don’t know how we can say it is impactful when it is measured solely on numbers of people coming through and numbers delivered.” (Workshop participant)

The different tools and approaches used in impact practice e.g., logic models, Theory of Change, OBA and understanding how to use them effectively in work and meet funder requirements

Workshop participants commented that the different tools and approaches can be confusing and perhaps make impact practice daunting, particularly to those who have less knowledge. There appears not to be a clear understanding of the difference between logic models, theory of change and the two different levels of accountability in OBA (population and performance).

One of the participants commented:

“It’s really the variances in approaches that can sometimes cause confusion as well as what the funder is looking for as part of their evaluation.” (Project worker, Charity, £5k to £1m)

As noted in the above comment, funder requirements can add further confusion. In addition, the lack of consistency from Government and varying levels of understanding about impact practice across the civil service can also make it challenging for organisations to implement good impact practice.

“What is the Government direction here of travel and clarity around approaches vs accountability. I think there is varying understanding across the civil service.” (Workshop participant)

Identifying and choosing appropriate measures for your work

The workshop participants felt that people really need to understand the basic impact practice concepts to implement tools/approaches and identify appropriate measures. However, even those with a good understanding of impact practice found it difficult to identify and choose measures and know what is the most important data to collect.

“People struggle to know what key things they need to collect. Get them to think about the most important three things.” (Scoping meeting participant)

Effectively engaging your target audience in impact practice and evaluation

In the workshops, participants described some of the difficulties they experienced in getting their target audience to engage in the evaluation process. There was recognition choosing a more appropriate tool may help (e.g., from a questionnaire to a more creative method). Participants also described how some groups get overwhelmed with the amount of data they think they should be gathering. They emphasised the importance of proportionality and groups only collecting what they need to demonstrate impact.

One of the large regional organisations that supports impact practice in NI described how they have split their impact practice programme into three modules to make it easier to understand. Their first module looks at what is impact, the second focuses on Theory of Change and the third is developing a measurement plan.

3.2.4 Use of impact practice tools and approaches

We asked survey respondents which tools and approaches are used in their organisation. It appears there is quite a mix of tools and approaches used (see Chart 6).

- Almost three quarters (74%) either developed their own framework across most (30%) or some (44%) of their organisation.

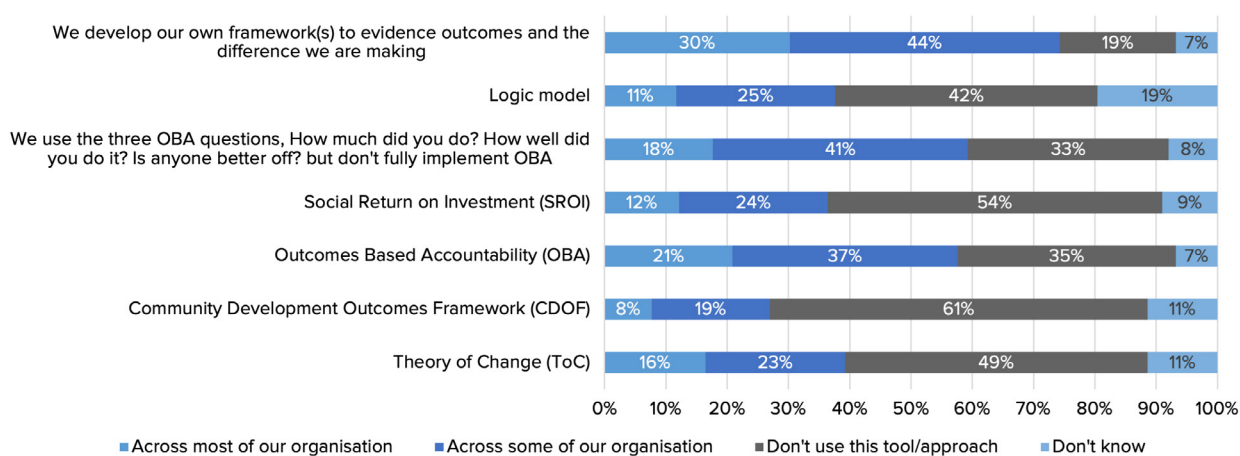
OBA was quite commonly used, however, more used the OBA three performance measure questions than OBA itself.

- 59% use the OBA three questions across most (18%) or some (41%) of their organisation.
- 58% use OBA across most (21%) or some (37%) of their organisation.
- Less than four fifths used Theory of Change or Logic Models.
- 39% used Theory of Change across most (16%) or some (23%) of their organisation.
- 36% used a Logic Model across most (11%) or some (25%) of their organisation.

Less than four fifths used SROI.

- 36% used SROI across most (12%) or some (24%) of their organisation.

Chart 6: Which tools/approaches does your organisation use?



Source: CDHN II Survey 2021
N=79 to 83

Some survey respondents named other tools such as Outcomes Star, Resilience Donut and social impact trackers. Others commented that they had developed their own tools, measures and frameworks for measuring impact, often derived from the established approaches, as demonstrated in the comment below:

“We use the above tools without actually labelling them this way e.g., when applying for new funding we start at the end and work forward—what we want to achieve/change in our community; the outcomes we want to achieve and how we are going to measure these—the activities we will undertake—the programme of work we are introducing. We do this internally without describing it as a tool.” (Manager, Charity, £100k to £500k)

Others described how they used mixed approaches as one model did not work for their whole organisation as is exemplified in the following comment:

“It’s difficult to find a tool or framework that encompasses all the outcomes across our organisation.” (Manager, Charity £1-10m)

Similarly, another described how they use a combination of approaches and why they do not use full OBA across all their services.

“Using full OBA isn’t appropriate across most of our services. Instead, a blend of Logic Models and the three OBA questions are implemented with a strong independent framework on evidencing outcomes.” (Management, Charity, £1m to £10m).

Another survey participant described how tools and techniques have changed, but they find the three OBA performance measure questions useful.

“Performance management fashions come and go. There have been various ‘tools’ and ‘techniques’ in vogue over the past few decades. The key questions - how much did we do, how well did we do it and is anyone better off? - are basic but good.” (Manager, Government).

Developing an impact/evaluation model for a whole organisation can be challenging for organisations – this applies to the large organisations as well as small, as a respondent from one large charity explained.

“Our biggest challenge in NI is having a subset of outcomes that are realistic and appropriate and that also link to the overall organisational outcomes but that also take account of the full span of programmes and projects that we deliver.” (Manager, Charity £1-10m)

In the workshops, participants described how they used Logic Models or Theory of Change as a starting point to think about what they are doing and why they are doing it. In their measurement plan or evaluation framework, they include measures that cover the three OBA questions ‘how much did I do, how well did I do it, is anyone better off?’—they can then translate their findings into an OBA report card format if required.

Workshop participants also emphasised how important it was to capture qualitative evidence and the story behind the baseline when using OBA. One of the challenges with some funder requirements and OBA is that there is a focus on quantitative data to show change, this data can be difficult to collect and does not always capture the lived experience and real difference that the project made to people’s lives. This is highlighted in the following comments.

“Anecdotal evidence of change is often more powerful than figures, however funders seem to like quantitative measures of change best.” (Manager, Charity, £10k to £100k)

“I learned about Inspiring Impact through CDHN & feel that sometimes the larger third sector organisations dismiss the value of lived experiences.” (Director/CEO, Charity, £1m to £10m)

3.3 Supporting organisations to achieve better outcomes and show the full impact of their work

3.3.1 Barriers to impact practice

We gave survey respondents a list of suggested barriers that may make it difficult for organisations to collect, analyse and use information about their impact and asked to indicate whether they were a large or small barrier or not a barrier. The findings are presented in Chart 7.

Staff with time to dedicate to impact practice was clearly the largest barrier, two thirds (66%) said this was a large barrier and a further 24% said this was a small barrier. Put together, 9 out of 10 said staff time was a barrier to impact practice.

The second biggest barrier was not having the funding or resources, 86% stated this was a barrier, with just over half (52%) stating this was a big barrier and just over a third (34%) stating this was a small barrier.

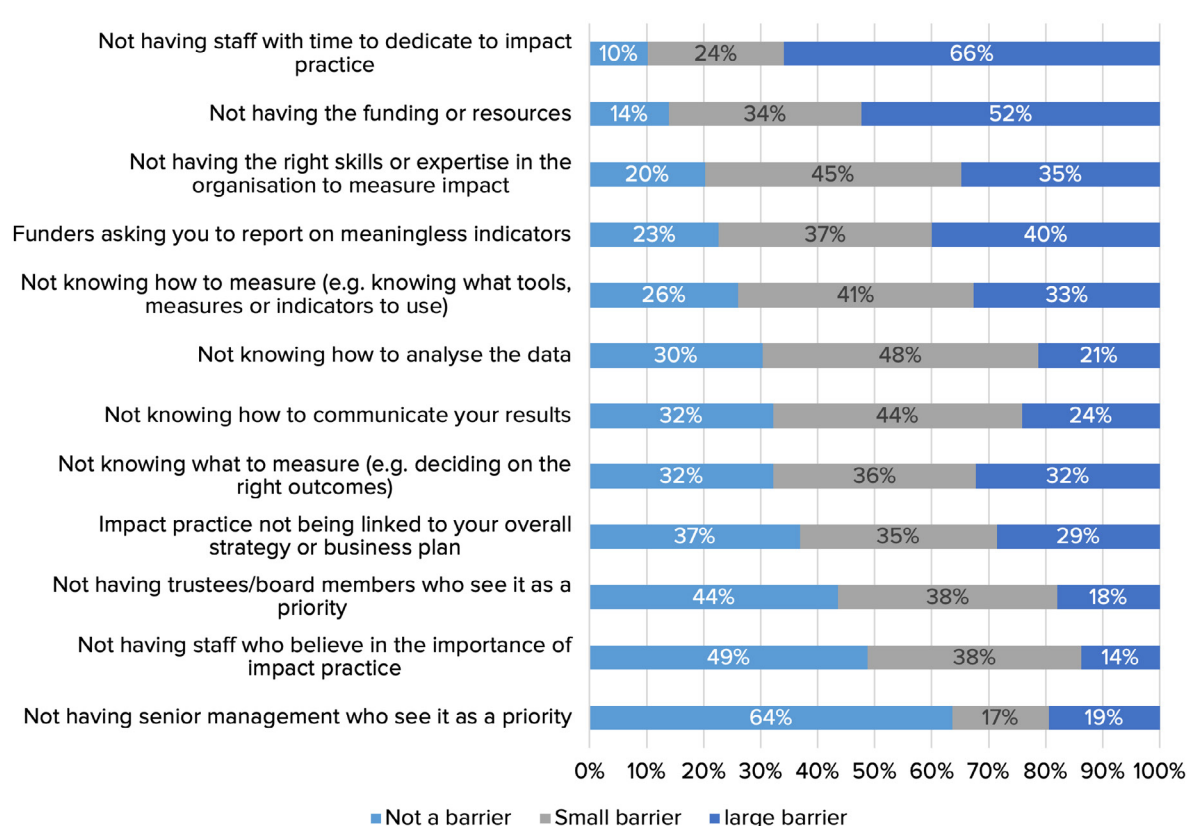
Not having the right skills or expertise in the organisation to measure impact was either a small or large barrier for four fifths (80%) of the respondents.

The people in organisations were seen by some as a barrier to impact practice. Senior management were seen as a barrier (small and large) by just over a third of respondents (36%) and just over half felt the board (56%) and staff (51%) were a small or large barrier to impact practice.

The other barriers had quite mixed responses between large, small and not a barrier which may be reflective of the mix of organisations and respondent roles that completed the survey.

In the survey comments and in the workshops, participants further explained the findings.

Chart 7: Barriers to impact practice



Source: CDHN II Survey 2021
N=77 to 92

3.3.2 Staffing and resources

Those from smaller organisations or those who support small groups and volunteers explained that it is difficult to find the time and resources within projects to measure impact, as demonstrated in the following comments.

“We support quite low-level groups, people want to get involved in community work, not complete surveys and fill in forms—creating time and resource that it is part of the project and not an afterthought. It’s very difficult to do as an afterthought if impact hasn’t been brought in during delivery.” (Workshop Participant)

“Volunteers are that busy ‘doing’ that they don’t take the time to measure the impact that they have. They may know that they are making a difference to the people that participate, who may verbalise it, but they don’t take the time to record it.” (Social Enterprise/CIC, £10k to £100k)

Other participants explained that they understand impact practice but do not have the funding to implement it or expertise to communicate their results.

“We do not have a problem with measuring impact, we just need funding to run projects to measure impact.” (CEO, Charity less than 10k income)

“Not have the resources or time to collect and analyse the results or expertise to be able to communicate these effectively e.g., through infographics.” (CIC, Volunteer, £10k to 100k)

3.3.3 The cost of impact practice

One to one/bespoke impact practice support is not part of the work delivered by Inspiring Impact. Some regional organisations offer this support to their members but often if people need support beyond free training sessions/resources, they will have to pay an external organisation for this service.

In the scoping meetings, an organisation that supports others with impact practice described one of the barriers to organisations receiving external support as an unrealistic expectation of how much bespoke support for impact practice costs. Organisations often allocate small budgets to this work and those who are commissioned to deliver may not receive full cost recovery within the allocated budget.

3.3.4 Funder requirements

Funder requirements were also highlighted earlier in the report. It appears that it is a challenge for organisations to deliver good impact practice when the data required for funders does not demonstrate the impact of the work. This is highlighted in the following comments.

“A barrier is funders/statutory bodies trying to dictate what ‘Impact’ is/should be: rightly or wrongly.” (Volunteer, charity, £10k to 100k)

“A lot is still driven by funders who have asked people to demonstrate impact and they are trying to see how they can tick that box or complete it in a funding application.” (Workshop participant)

“Being funding driven is a real balancing act for organisations to satisfy the requirements of the funder which can take you away from really understanding the difference that you’re making.” (Workshop participant)

3.3.5 The value of showing impact

Workshop participants emphasised that getting or maintaining funding should not be the main driver for impact practice. They commented that those who use the services, employees and board members need to know that it is also about valuing your work, knowing your project is worthwhile and is making a difference. It can also help organisations improve their work, become more efficient and less reliant on funding.

“There’s a bit of value in demonstrating why you should carry out impact practice just for your own work rather than to satisfy funders to prove to local communities that your project is worthwhile and making a difference.” (Workshop participant)

“Challenge is that getting our staff and volunteers and [people we support] to understand why we’re asking the questions and what benefit it is.” (Workshop participant)

3.3.6 Impact practice is relevant for all

Another noted barrier is when impact practice is only seen as relevant to senior management or large organisations. It is relevant for everyone in an organisation from volunteers to senior management and for all organisations, no matter how big or small.

“Big challenge of impact practice is that this is relevant across the sector. This is relevant to the men’s shed, the knitting natter groups right through to big regional organisations who often do dominate and have all the lingo but do not have the experience of the likes of the smaller groups. It’s really important that small community groups see the value of measuring impact and have the tools that would be useful to them and support from their peers.” (Workshop participant)

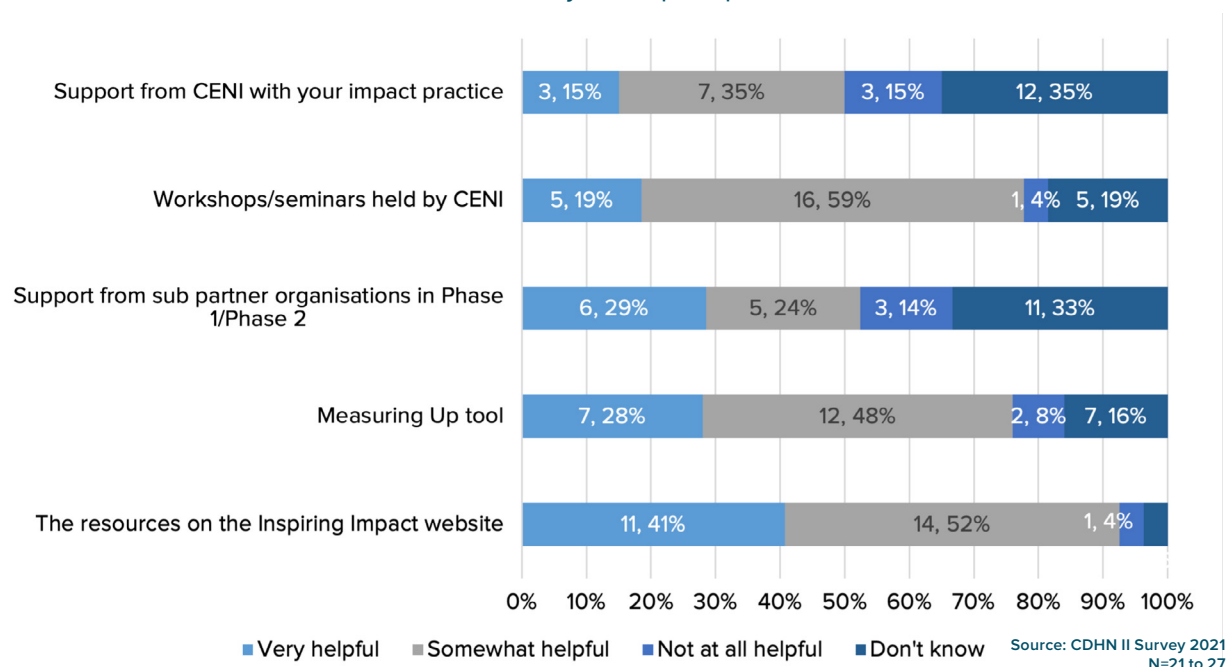
3.4 Impact and learning from Inspiring Impact

3.4.1 Inspiring Impact

We asked respondents about their involvement with Inspiring Impact. Interestingly 51% (n=45) stated they were not involved with Inspiring Impact. This may be reflective of CDHN members and contacts being different to the CENI audience. One of the workshop participants explained that they did not know about Inspiring Impact until they received an email from CDHN asking them to complete the survey. This sample was therefore likely to draw on the experiences of community-based organisations with a particular interest in community development and health inequalities.

We asked Respondents how helpful different parts of Inspiring Impact were to their practice (see Chart 8). The most helpful parts of Inspiring Impact were the resources on the website (93% stated they were very or somewhat helpful), the Measuring Up tool (76% stated this was very or somewhat helpful) and the workshops/seminars held by CENI (78% stated this was very or somewhat helpful).

Chart 8: How helpful the following parts of Inspiring Impact have been in your impact practice



Survey participants commented on what they felt was most beneficial about Inspiring Impact. The support from the UK Inspiring Impact team, the workshops/seminars, the Inspiring Impact website and the Measuring Up tool were all noted.

“Attending the workshops/seminars was the most beneficial aspect for myself. It allowed me to gain a perspective on where we were as an organisation in the collection and presentation of outcomes and

outcome data. The communication with the facilitators—particularly those from a wide range of academic backgrounds was very useful in gaining insights into valuable experience I would not be exposed to otherwise.” (Management, Charity, £1m to £10m)

“We benefitted from direct support from the UK Inspiring Impact team and regularly feed into their consultations re developments.” (Director/CEO, Charity, £10k to £100k)

“Using the Inspiring Impact website to support organisations measure their impact and in particular the Measuring Up Tool.” (Director/CEO, Charity, £1m to £10m)

One participant did note however that the Measuring Up tool while beneficial is now outdated.

“Measuring Up tool was beneficial for our membership—but is now outdated and we no longer signpost to this.” (Director/CEO, Charity, £10k to £100k)

3.4.2 Inspiring Impact and CENI support to Government

Notably two of the Government responses in the survey praised the support that CENI and Inspiring Impact gave to OBA and PfG. One respondent stated that the most useful part of Inspiring Impact was:

“Awareness workshops and CENI by co design assisting VCSE organisations to develop OBA Frameworks relevant to the organisation and/or projects being delivered.” (Management, Government)

“The support which the Programme has provided in terms of encouraging take up and use of impact assessment practice by PfG stakeholders and delivery partners.” (Management, Government)

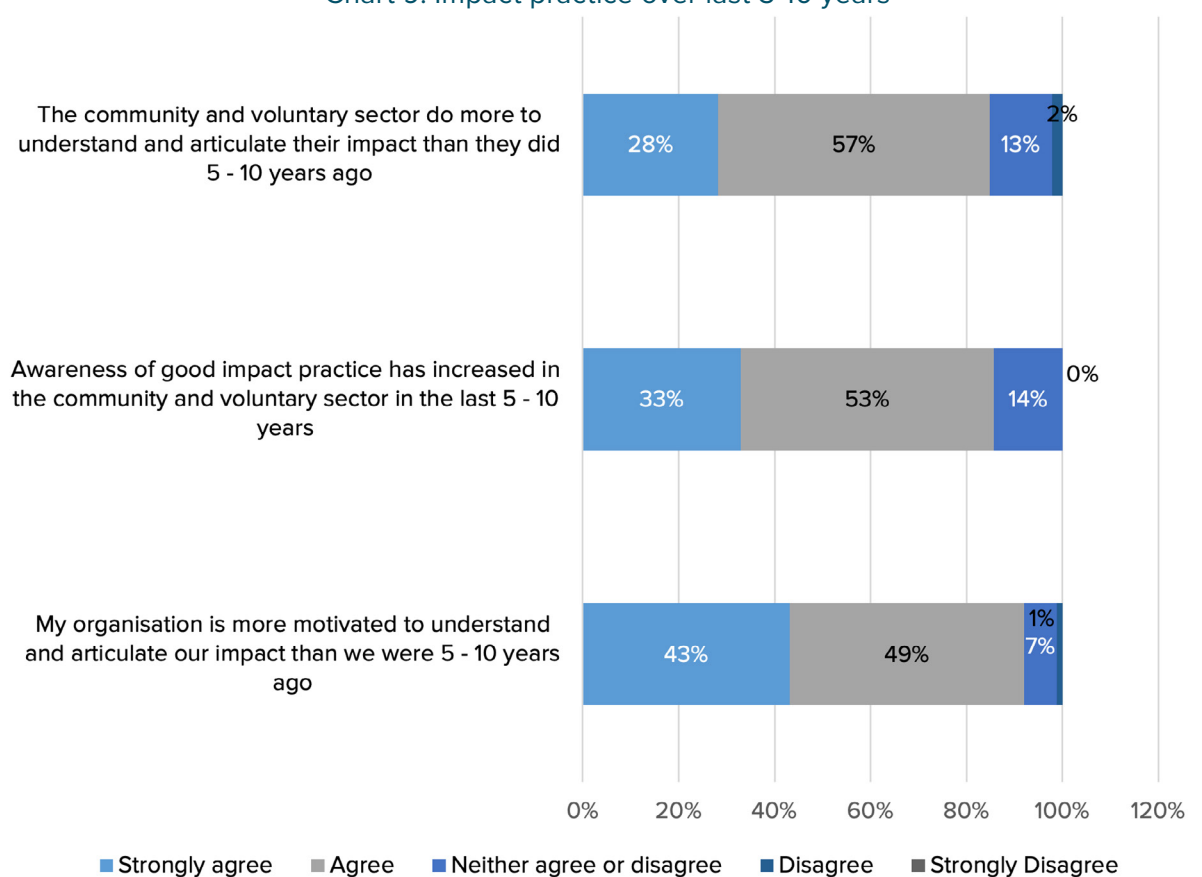
This support provided by CENI and Inspiring Impact is no longer available.

3.5 Improvements in Impact Practice

We asked survey respondents about their perceptions about impact practice in NI over the last five to 10 years (see Chart 9).

- 92% agreed or strongly agreed that their organisation is more motivated to understand and articulate impact than it was five to 10 years ago.
- 86% agreed or strongly agreed that awareness of good impact practice has increased in the voluntary and community sector over the last five to 10 years.
- 85% agreed or strongly agreed that the voluntary and community sector do more to understand and articulate their impact than they did five to 10 years ago.

Chart 9: Impact practice over last 5-10 years



Source: CDHN II Survey 2021
N=88 to 92

Workshop participants and survey respondents commented further that impact practice has improved over the last five to 10 years and that VCSE organisations recognise the importance of impact practice. This is exemplified in the following comments.

“As Government and other charitable funders become more aware of the need to move beyond outputs, the third sector has been compelled to begin thinking about the difference it makes.”

(Manager, Charity, £1m to £10m)

“I believe the rest of the VCSE is slowly reacting to the importance of impact practice however in our own organisation, we are much more strongly committed to impact practice than we have been in previous years.” (Manager, Charity, £1m to £10m)

“There is increased recognition of the need to gather information and adapt practice around changing needs which will secure funding and deliver more effective programmes within communities.” (Manager, Health, and Social Care)

However, in a similar vein to earlier comments about funders, some commented that organisations are only measuring impact to meet funder requirements.

“Funders are increasingly asking groups to describe their impact. I believe that they are the main reason groups are doing this.” (Manager, Charity, £10k to £100k)

While there has been a big improvement in impact practice over the last five to 10 years, it is also evident that more work is needed and there was a genuine concern from participants that all the hard work and improvements in learning and knowledge could be lost if Inspiring Impact ends and impact practice is not continued to be promoted and supported in NI.

One of the workshop participants emphasised this point “This can’t be an end point and it’s not something that has an end point – that is one of the underlying principles of impact practice.”

They also questioned what will happen when the Inspiring Impact programme ends.

“What will remain if the programme ends and what are the connections in terms of legacy and where else can people get support.”

In the survey, one of the respondents was concerned that the learning in impact practice in the sector was starting to wane and this has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

“I think we are retrograding under pressure of time, funds and the pandemic pause.”
(Consultant, Private sector)

In the workshops, participants also commented on the impact of the pandemic, discussing the changes to the sector, how some organisations have gone, some have emerged or grown significantly and for all, how they deliver work is different.

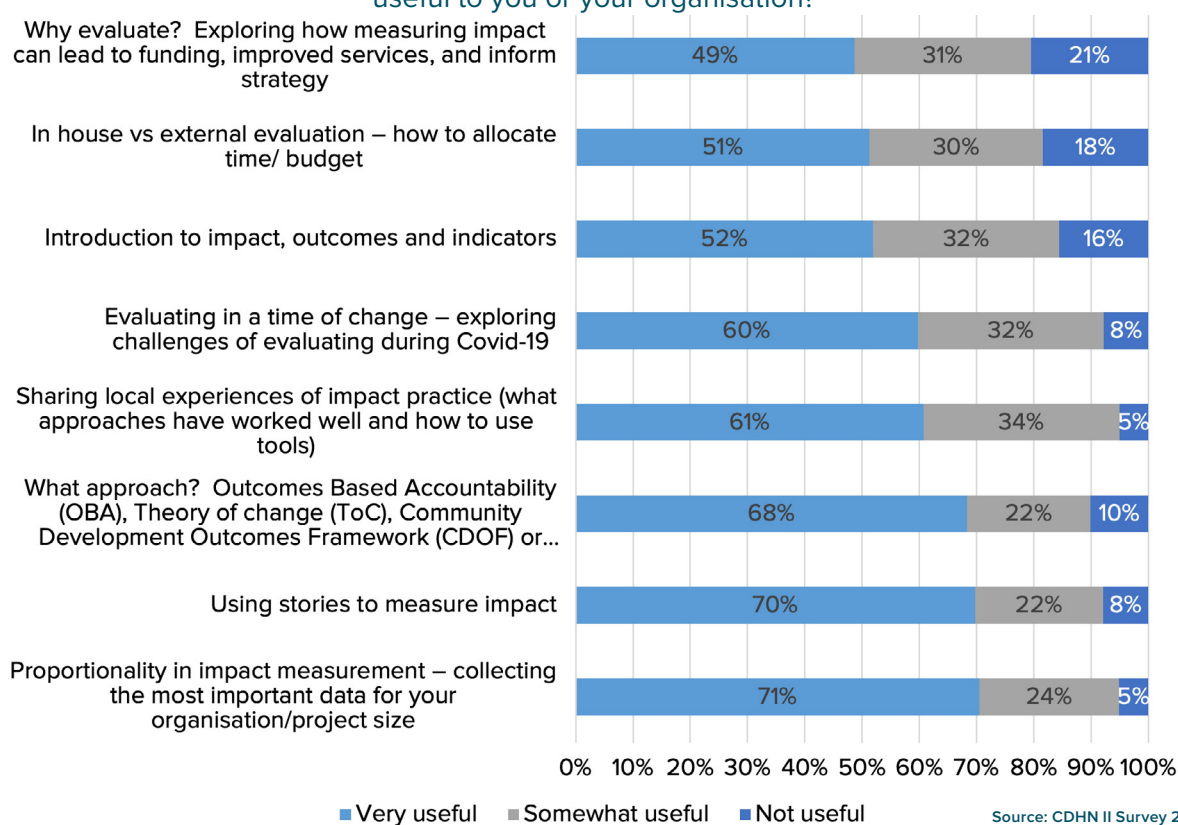
The workshop participants were clear that continuing the promotion and support of impact practice is not something that could be achieved effectively without a financial resource. The key barriers to impact practice were not having staffing, funding or resources. Organisations already struggle to achieve this within the constraints of their own organisation without delivering additional work in the area.

3.6 Priorities for Impact practice and Inspiring Impact in Northern Ireland

3.6.1 Impact practice support

We asked survey respondents how useful they felt various impact training sessions would be to them or their organisation. All the suggested sessions appeared to be seen as useful by most respondents (see Chart 10). Those seen as the most useful were proportionality in impact measurement (71%), using stories to measure impact (70%) and what approach (68%).

Chart 10: What impact sessions do you think would be most useful to you or your organisation?



3.6.2 Delivery formats

Online and pre-recorded sessions: During Covid-19, participants have recognised the value of online sessions. It makes it much easier for people to find the time to attend. They also felt that it would be beneficial to have these sessions recorded or in a pre-recorded webinar format so that people can access them when they are developing their impact practice and can easily refer back for help.

“Webinars and things that people can access in their own time will help embed and promote the value of impact practice.” (Workshop participant)

While this was supported in general, there was a concern that recordings will need updated and someone must take responsibility for maintenance of information and websites.

“It’s not sustainable just to put webinars on a website, it needs more than that, things go out of date and there needs to be someone responsible to ensure things are kept up to date and informing sector of any changes.” (Workshop participant)

People also did not want to see a complete removal of face-to-face sessions as they really valued the informal interaction and learning that takes place over breaks and the start and end of the meeting.

“CENI workshops – the actual face to face meetings were very useful, conversations over a cup of tea and talk to someone who is going through a similar journey. This would not be as effective during a Teams/Zoom session. The before and after conversations are just as useful as main training.”

Different levels of training/resources and different themes: It was clear that levels of understanding of impact practice vary across the sector also there are different elements of impact practice where people may need support. Sessions and/or resources should clearly state the level they are targeted at e.g., introductory, intermediate, advanced and split into different topic areas, e.g., what is impact practice, tools, models and measures.

It was also suggested that it could be beneficial to have thematic areas, for example, focusing sessions/resources on different VCSE specialisms e.g., children and young people, sport, housing and health.

Support beyond training: In the workshops, participants described how more support is needed beyond training, particularly for smaller organisations. This is exemplified in a comment by one of the participants in the informal interview.

“Grass roots organisations genuinely need the support – it’s not just about giving them the resources and letting them get on with it. Resources are available online but you need to check and challenge a person to facilitate the learning.”

Peer learning: Participants were supportive of the peer learning format and recognised the value it can bring.

“There is a lot of different levels of expertise – it would be good to create communities where everyone is at the same level and share good practice or link those with experience to those who need support.”

While people were supportive of this format, there were concerns that current financial and staffing strains may mean that organisations will not be able to commit to these sessions.

Support with measures: Participants would like some simple templates that they can use in their work and examples of measures that they can use in their surveys or other data collection tools. They would also like guidance on how to integrate impact practice into daily work so it can be used throughout the project and does not feel like an extra piece of work at the end. This is exemplified in the comment below.

“How do you embed indicators into your daily work so it’s less seen as add on at the end and can we use it in some way to show individuals the journey that they have travelled and for different projects that has different challenges?” (Workshop participant)

They would also like help thinking about different measurement tools to measure impact and not just focus on quantitative measures such as questionnaires.

“The work that is being done in the small community groups is really impactful and you get to see every day the difference that is being made to people’s lives, we shouldn’t have to rely on a questionnaire to capture it, there has to be other more useable tools that do capture that difference is made.” (Workshop participant)

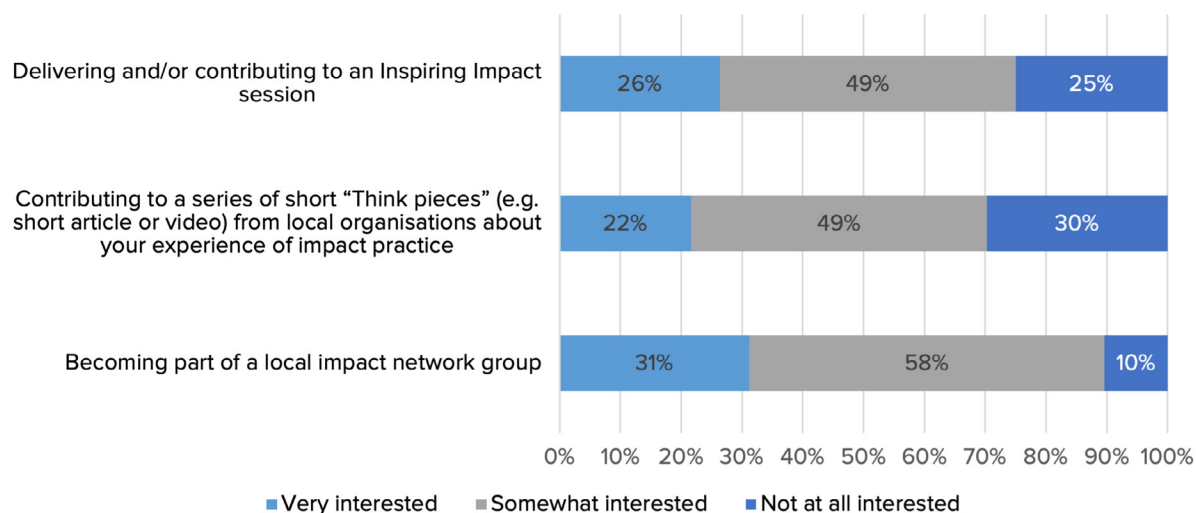
Tips on how to collect data: Workshop participants described how it could be difficult to get those who use their services to complete surveys and take part in other evaluation methods for their projects. They would like some tips on how to collect data and encourage involvement.

3.7 The Future

3.7.1 Joint working

We asked survey respondents how interested their organisation would be in three suggestions that CDHN had for developing impact practice into the future (see Chart 11). The most popular suggestion was becoming part of a local impact network group with nine in 10 stating they would be somewhat or very interested. Three quarters (75%) were interested or very interested in delivering and/or contributing to an Inspiring Impact session and 71% would be very or somewhat interested in contributing to a series of ‘think pieces’.

Chart 11: How interested would you or your organisation be in the following?



Source: CDHN II Survey 2021
N=72 to 77

There was support in the workshops for setting up a local impact network group to complement and support each other’s work rather than risk duplication of efforts.

“Given that resource is such an issue when it comes to this, we want to ensure that work is complementary rather than overlap.”

A consortium approach was suggested, with leads/champions under different themes e.g., sport, health, housing and disability.

Another useful suggestion was to have a public list of organisations that support organisations with impact practice. This is currently not available in NI.

There were some concerns about being involved in an impact network group and how it would work in practice. These were around time commitment and getting agreement from senior management in their organisation. Another concern was that potentially the group members could be in competition with each other for work in the future. This may create tension and considerations would need to be given as to how this would be managed.

The time commitment to contributing to sessions and ‘think pieces’ was also raised in the workshops. As has been highlighted throughout the report, organisations have limited staff time and resources to measure and promote their impact. If they are supporting other organisations without additional resource, they would have to ensure that it fits within their organisational outcomes to justify delivering the work.

3.7.2 Government direction on outcomes and impact practice

Government perspectives on impact practice, outcomes-based approaches, Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) and the PfG were discussed in the workshops. Participants felt that the future of impact practice in NI needs clarity on the government direction on outcomes-based approaches and the importance of impact.

One workshop participant explained that the conflicting messages about outcomes-based approaches are confusing to impact practice.

“We get conflicting messages from different Government departments, we have a project funded by PSNI [Police Service of Northern Ireland] and DoJ [Department of Justice] and they talk about outcomes-based approaches but not OBA [Outcomes Based Accountability] as a methodology, yet PfG [Programme for Government] is using OBA. I think it’s a really important distinction to make whether it is an outcomes-based approach or OBA [Outcomes Based Accountability].”

The ‘New Decade New Approach’ (NDNA) states that the PfG should be developed through engagement and co-design. The VCSE sector wants to be involved in this work so it is clear what their role is and how they can contribute. Many VCSE organisations receive funding from local and regional Government. It is not clear if they should be using OBA to demonstrate the impact of their projects if they are Government funded.

There is also work needed for the VCSE sector to understand the purpose and role of PfG in their work, so that they know whether the work they do on the ground contributes to the population indicators in OBA.

3.7.3 Shared measurement and common outcomes frameworks

The work that CENI completed with funders early in the Inspiring Impact programme was raised. It was felt that this could be revisited and discussions started with key funders, commissioners, public sector and the VCSE sector about shared measures and common outcomes frameworks.¹⁸ Having shared measurement and common outcomes frameworks would make it much easier for impact practice in the VCSE sector. One workshop participant commented that funders and the VCSE sector need to come together to talk about how they can support each other with impact practice.

“Speak to the funders, particularly public sector funders about what their role might be in supporting us in the longer term to come together to talk about impact practice with them not just on their own.”

3.7.4 Government resourcing of impact practice

Workshop participants discussed the Government advocating outcomes-based approaches and good impact practice. If there is an expectation for the VCSE sector to report using models or outcome measures and to clearly recognise the PfG in their work, the Government must resource the sector for this to be achieved effectively. It is clear from the findings of the report that while extensive progress has been made in impact practice, many organisations (both big and small) still need support on all elements of impact practice including support around outcomes-based approaches. Most VCSE organisations do not have additional staff, time or resources to fully achieve this or to assist other organisations within the sector and the support that CENI and Inspiring Impact provided to Government in the past is no longer available.

¹⁸ Further info on shared measurement: Inspiring Impact (2013) Blueprint for shared measurement. <https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/blueprint-for-shared-measurement/>

4. Conclusion

Impact practice knowledge and understanding has clearly increased over the last 10 years. There is a wider recognition of why it is important and the value of impact practice. This is no doubt attributable to Inspiring Impact and the changing focus from funders and NI Government on outcomes-based approaches. Nevertheless, more support is still needed in the planning, implementation and evaluation of impact practice. While this is a particular issue for smaller organisations, there is evidence that there are variances in levels of understanding within large organisations. Four overarching areas where understanding and knowledge need improvement are:

- i. A basic understanding of what impact practice is and the difference between impact, outcomes and outputs
- ii. Understanding the different tools and approaches that are used in impact practice (e.g., Logic Models, Theory of Change and OBA), how to use them in your work and meet funder requirements
- iii. Understanding how to identify and choose appropriate measures for your work
- iv. Understanding how to effectively engage your target audience in impact measurement and evaluation

The key barriers to impact practice are lack of staff, time and resources. These are not always considered in projects and funding streams. Budget allocations for impact practice and evaluation are sometimes not reflective of the amount of work required. The capacity may not be available within the organisation or the budget may not be financially appealing for external agencies to complete the work.

The VCSE sector is facing added pressure due to the pandemic. Some VCSE organisations have closed and others have changed their work significantly since Covid-19. Sometimes there is a focus on impact practice to meet funder requirements rather than its role in strategic planning, recognising the difference organisations make and learning from an evidence-based way of working.

Government and funders use different tools and approaches to measure impact, which is confusing and unhelpful for organisations in their impact practice work. Some requirements are only outputs or quantitative outcome data which can be difficult to collect and do not always reflect the real difference made.

Never has there been a more important time to measure impact. The NI Executive is bringing forward an Outcomes-based Programme for Government (PfG) and outcomes-based approaches are being used throughout Government including the new development of the Future Planning Model for Health (Integrated Care System). The approaches used and expected contribution of the VCSE sector to measure progress against outcomes is not always clear. The VCSE sector wants to be involved in this work, however, given current financial constraints and the potential end of the Inspiring Impact programme, this will have to be resourced by Government to be delivered effectively.

5. Recommendations

- 1) There are many organisations in NI that have extensive knowledge and understanding of impact practice. However, there is no main or 'go to' organisation in NI for impact practice. To help explore peer support, shared learning and to ensure the VCSE sector is fully represented in the ongoing Government work on outcomes-based approaches, it is recommended that a **round table of interested organisations come together to explore developing an impact practice consortium**.
- 2) At present, there is no clear route for VCSE organisations to access support with impact practice. Organisations have expertise in different areas of impact practice and thematic areas. A **directory of organisations** that can offer impact practice support should be available online.
- 3) Any organisation developing impact practice resources should have a focus on the four overarching areas where understanding and knowledge need improvement:
 - i. Basics about what impact practice is and the difference between impact, outcomes and outputs
 - ii. The different tools and approaches used in impact practice e.g., Logic Models, Theory of Change, OBA and understanding how to use them effectively in work and meet funder requirements
 - iii. Identifying and choosing appropriate measures for your work
 - iv. How to effectively engage your target audience in impact measurement and evaluation
- 4) The NI Government is using an outcomes-based approach for PfG. This approach will be used throughout Government beyond PfG (e.g., The NI Future Planning Model for Health-Integrated Care System). Government departments need to facilitate constructive discussions with the VCSE sector to **provide clarity on outcomes-based approaches** and how they foresee the VCSE sector contributing.
- 5) Funding in the VCSE sector often comes from public funds. If Government requires the VCSE sector to be involved in the development of strategic outcomes and use outcomes-based approaches, they must **ring fence public funding** for ongoing support for the sector to build its practice and effectively demonstrate impact.
- 6) Funders need to **review their current impact practice and evaluation requirements** and include appropriate budget allocations in funding opportunities/tenders.
- 7) VCSE organisations need to **include appropriate budgets** for impact practice and/or evaluation in all funding applications and tenders.
- 8) There are benefits to common outcomes and measures being used in NI. It will help organisations to decide on their outcomes, identify measures and enable them to meaningfully compare their results to other organisations. It could also help funders to decide what outcome data they would like their grantees to collect and be used by Government to show progress against PfG. To explore this further, a **mapping exercise on outcomes frameworks and measures** being used in NI should be completed. This should go beyond the VCSE sector and look at funders and the statutory sector including local government and community planning. As there are so many different types of organisations, it may be useful to focus on different thematic areas e.g., children, older people, housing, sport. This mapping exercise could contribute to the PfG engagement and co-design process.
- 9) CDHN and others involved in Impact Practice in NI should continue to **foster good relationships** with the former Inspiring Impact partners (NPC, Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS), The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), Social Value UK and Wales Council for Voluntary Action) and identify opportunities for joint working in the future.



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