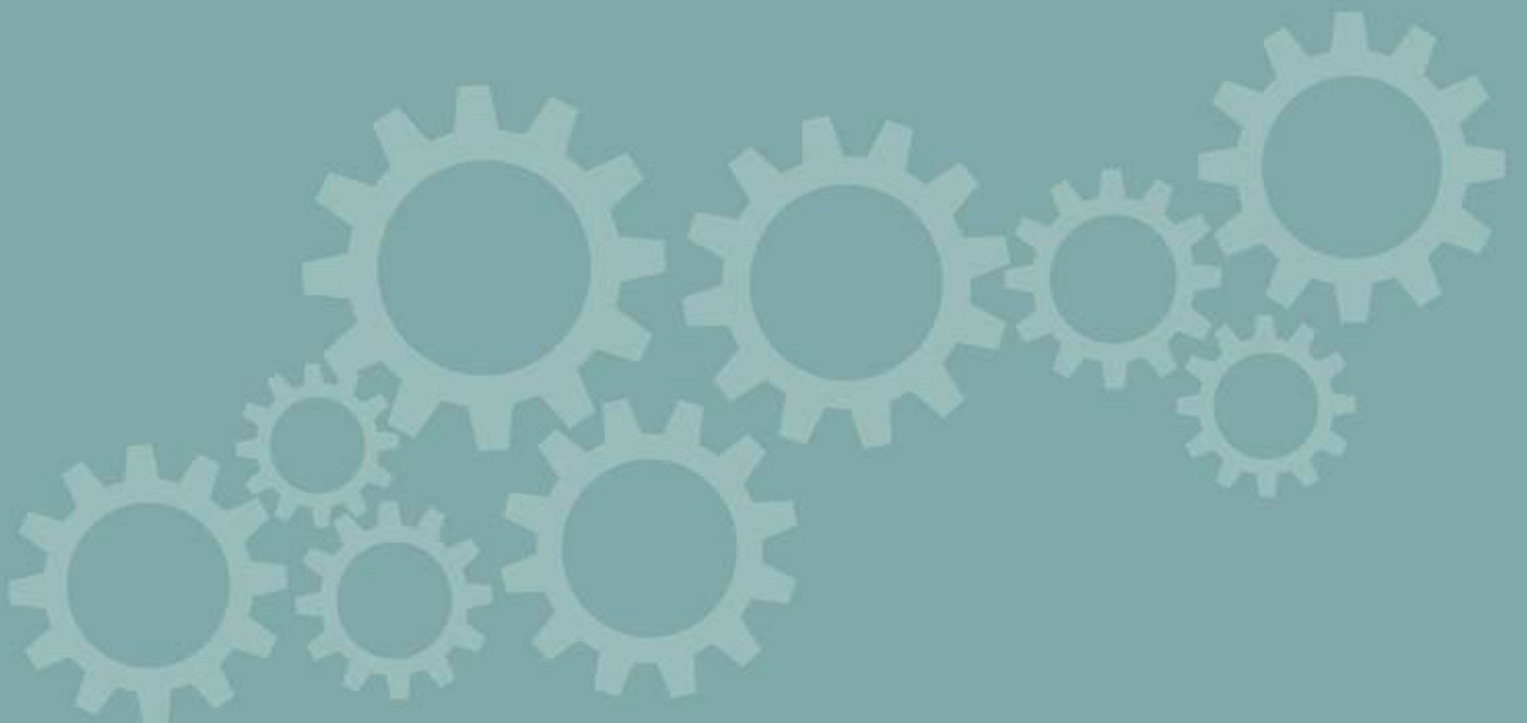

Outcomes-based Approaches to Public Service Reform: Event Report

Ailsa Cook



What Works Scotland (WWS) aims to improve the way local areas in Scotland use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.

We are working with community planning partnerships involved in the design and delivery of public services (Aberdeenshire, Fife, Glasgow and West Dunbartonshire) to:

- learn what is and what isn't working in their local area
- encourage collaborative learning with a range of local authority, business, public sector and community partners
- better understand what effective policy interventions and effective services look like
- promote the use of evidence in planning and service delivery
- help organisations get the skills and knowledge they need to use and interpret evidence
- create case studies for wider sharing and sustainability

We also link with international partners to effectively compare how public services are delivered here in Scotland and elsewhere.

What Works Scotland brings together the universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh and other academics across Scotland, with partners from a range of local authorities and the Glasgow Centre for Population Health; Improvement Service. Inspiring Scotland; IRISS (Institution for Research and Innovation in Social Services); NHS Education for Scotland; NHS Health Scotland; NHS Health Improvement for Scotland; Scottish Community Development Centre; and SCVO (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations).

This is one of a series of papers published by What Works Scotland and relates to the What Works Scotland **Governance** workstream. What Works Scotland is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Scottish Government www.whatworksscotland.ac.uk

Dr Ailsa Cook is Director of Outcome Focus, a consultancy based in Edinburgh supporting organisations to use evidence based and action orientated approaches to innovate and improve outcomes.

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Background

Outcomes is a concept at the centre of efforts to improve public services in Scotland, across the UK and beyond.

The concept of outcomes is inexorably interwoven with the ongoing drive to reform public services through a focus on efficiency, accountability, partnership, personalisation and co-production. Despite a decade-long commitment to taking an outcomes based approach to public services in Scotland, progress in implementation has been slow. This reflects the picture internationally, where the time taken to shift systems and processes to focus on outcomes and challenges around measurement and attribution, have been identified as key barriers to working in this way.

In response to these issues What Works Scotland commissioned Ailsa Cook to review the evidence around outcomes-based approaches in public services in light of policy and practice in this area. The aim of the paper was to explore issues and opportunities in taking forward an outcomes-based approach to public service reform and make recommendations about how best to embed a focus on outcomes within Scottish public services.

The paper was presented at an event for policymakers and practitioners on 19 April 2017 along with presentations from people at the forefront of developing outcomes-based approaches at personal, programme and population levels.

About the event

The event was attended by 60 delegates working across local and national organisations in the public and third sector. The event was held over half a day at the St Mungo Museum of Religious Art and Life in Glasgow and included a mix of presentations and small group discussions. The presentations were given by:

- Ailsa Cook, summarising key messages from her paper
- Emma Miller from the University of Strathclyde, presenting learning from more than a decade of research and improvement work around personal outcomes approaches
- Steven Marwick from Evaluation Support Scotland, reflecting on lessons from its work supporting third sector organisations to focus on outcomes at a programme level
- Tim Kendrick from Fife Community Planning Partnership, reflecting on progress in embedding a focus on population outcomes in planning and reporting processes

This short report summarises the key messages from these presentations and captures the learning and issues raised during the discussion. The report concludes with a summary of feedback about the event from participants.

Event resources

Resources from the event are available on the What Works Scotland website:

- Position paper <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/publications/outcomes-based-approaches-in-public-service-reform>
- Presentations <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/events/outcomes-based-approaches-in-public-service-reform>

Focussing on outcomes in public services: messages from the presentations

Across the four presentations some clear messages emerged. These included:

1. The term outcome is used in a range of different ways across policy and practice. It is possible to differentiate three distinct ways in which the concept is operationalised at personal, programme and population level. It is important when taking an outcomes-focussed approach to be clear about language.
2. The Scottish Approach to public service reform explicitly works with complexity, promoting co-produced, personalised and partnership-based approaches. Working in this way means that it is impossible to directly attribute any given activity to an outcome as outcomes are necessarily the result of a complex interplay of factors. Contribution is a more helpful concept when working with outcomes in this context and theories of change can be used to underpin working in this way.
3. Internationally, organisations and governments have found embedding outcomes-based approaches challenging at every level of the system. This finding was echoed by the presenters who all shared difficulties encountered in working in this way.
4. There are examples of well-developed outcomes-focussed practice in Scotland, in particular at personal and programme levels. The presentations made reference to the extensive learning captured through this pioneering work and the tools and resources available to help other organisations develop their outcomes approaches.
5. The presentations identified a range of benefits that a focus on outcomes can bring for individuals and organisations. These include:
 - ensuring a clarity of focus
 - ensuring organisations are responding to issues important to people
 - generating data for learning and improvement

Delegate discussions

Delegates worked in small groups to address three questions:

- What is working well?
- What can be improved?
- What do we need to do to make the change?

The strong progress made in involving the community in public services, through a focus of assets and outcomes was identified as the part of the system that was working well. The concept of contribution to outcomes, reflecting the many different ways individuals and agencies work together to improve outcomes, was seen to be particularly important in promoting this work.

Delegates identified a range of issues that could be improved, including:

- More use of plain English around outcomes.
- The development of simple frameworks that link activities and outcomes that can be used for measurement and decision-making. This was seen as a gap in implementing the National Performance Framework, which currently requires organisations to report on indicators, not all of which meaningfully relate to outcomes. The current refresh of this Framework was identified as an important opportunity for improvement.
- Acceptance that we won't always have success in achieving outcomes and that it is OK to take risks, to try to do things differently and to learn from failure.

Delegates identified a range of things that their organisations and other agencies could do to embed effective outcomes approaches. These included:

- building knowledge, capacity and skills for outcomes-based working
- being clear in use of language about outcomes
- being proactive in engaging people in outcomes who are reluctant to work in this way
- talking about outcomes honestly in partnerships and promoting the benefits of outcomes-based working

Middle managers were seen as having a particularly important role in implementation as the people who bridge strategic priorities around population outcomes and the focus on personal outcomes in practice.

This discussion also highlighted a wider issue about the importance of a focus on outcomes for developing assets-based, creative and preventative approaches and how wider systemic factors can get in the way, for example austerity.

What delegates thought of the event

People rated the seminar very highly and particularly enjoyed the quality of the presentations and discussions.

People identified a range of things they took from the seminar, including:

- a clearer understanding of outcomes
- reassurance that they are not alone in finding working with outcomes hard
- insights and examples of good practice
- the importance of linking from personal to population outcomes

Delegates would like future events to include a focus on practical examples of outcomes based working at the different levels; outcome measurement and reporting; and the link between outcomes, austerity and public service reform.