

Applying an Impact Practice approach with DSD's RISP Advice Theme



This case study outlines how Inspiring Impact Northern Ireland piloted an outcomes focused approach with public sector funders by supporting the Regional Infrastructure Support Programme's (RISP) Advice theme to apply an impact practice approach to its funding programme.

The Department for Social Development's RISP provides funding for regional infrastructure organisations involved in playing a supporting, co-ordinating or development role in relation to voluntary and community sector organisations, particularly in those policy areas which are the responsibility of DSD.

The Advice theme of RISP entails funding support to the Northern Ireland Advice Service Consortium (NIASC). NIASC comprises the regional bodies of Advice NI, Citizen Advice Regional Office and Law Centre NI. Together they provide a wide range of support services including training, IT, quality standards and coordination of Management Information to the front line advice providers.

1 What was done?

The pilot sought to provide key programme staff with guidance and support to undertake the following tasks:

- Understand and apply the principles of good impact practice (See figure 1)
- A self-assessment of the current funding programme against the plan-do-assess-review cycle
- Develop a theory of change for the programme

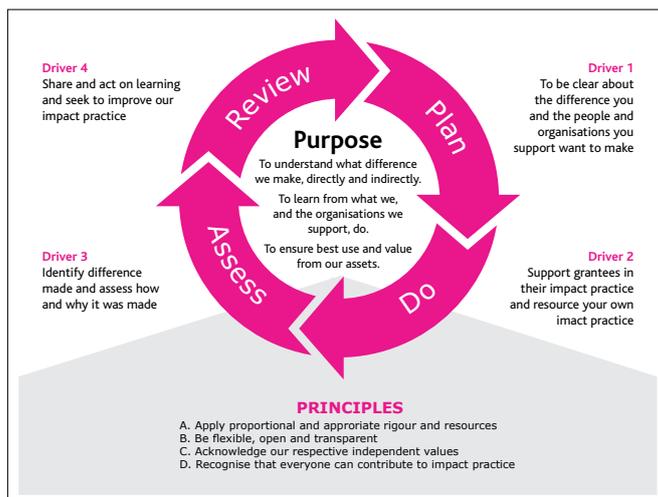


Figure 1

This was carried out over a four month period from December 2014 – March 2015. The pilot tested the online Measuring Up! resource to review how they currently plan for, deliver, assess and review information that will demonstrate whether the programme has an impact on the groups it supports. From here they then embarked on developing a Theory of Change for the programme which would set out in an overarching document what they hope to achieve with this funding programme.

¹ **Impact Practice:** the activities that an organisation does to focus on its impact. This can include planning desired impact, planning how to measure it, collecting information about it, making sense of that information, communicating it and learning from it.

2 What changes resulted?

In the past we would have developed programmes without overthinking or asking the difficult and challenging questions. This process has changed our approach to thinking about and developing our programme. Undertaking a review using the Measuring Up questions helped to point out aspects of the programme that were missing. In the past we have not been great at implementing recommendations and change.

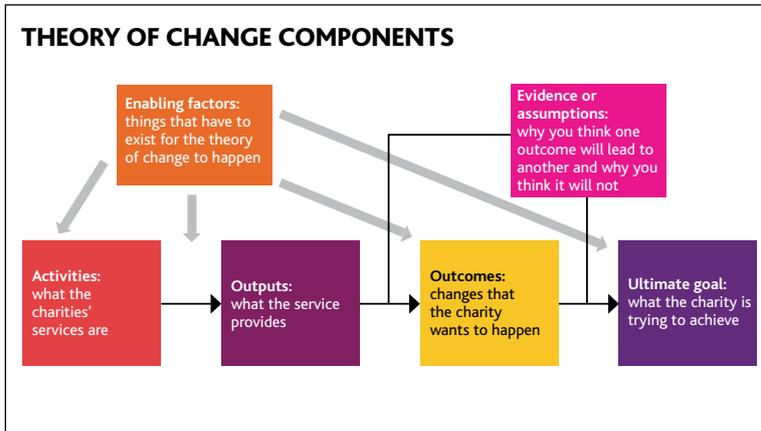


Figure 2

Developing and using a theory of change has enabled us to look more closely at aligning with broader policy goals and objectives and has been useful for structuring what we would like the Advice sector to do / achieve. We already had a strategy which made this exercise easier but this exercise has helped us to allocate and direct resources towards our key priorities.

3 What benefits are likely?

The ultimate benefit is a more coherent and structured support programme that will help the consortium to deliver quality advice services to the people of Northern Ireland.

This work was also complemented by a Quality Standard that will guide service provision by the Advice consortium.

All of this will result in alignment of systems that will enable generation of better evidence that can demonstrate whether the services being provided by the consortium will have an impact on the people that are accessing them.

4 Challenges encountered

We felt that this pilot was rushed and would have preferred more time to work through the different stages.

Another challenge for us was the need for our programme to be reviewed and approved by the economic / audit functions of Government. This resulted in including targets that we didn't want in order to get the programme approved.

Concern re the security / confidentiality of Measuring Up! when undertaken online.

5 What next?

As part of DSD's ongoing support to phase 2 of the Inspiring Impact NI programme the RISP Advice theme will continue to be supported through the stages of the impact practice cycle. This will involve:

- Reviewing the existing Theory of Change
- Develop corresponding outcomes and indicator framework
- Review of existing data monitoring mechanisms
- Development of monitoring mechanisms and explore approaches to generate outcomes data