



# **I**NSPIRING **IMPACT** **NI**

## **Preliminary insights and lessons from the VCSE support programme**

Shared Learning Paper

May 2015





This report has been produced by  
Community Evaluation Northern Ireland  
on behalf of the Building Change Trust.

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# Introduction

Inspiring Impact Northern Ireland (IINI) is part of the Inspiring Impact UK initiative which aspires to change the way that Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations and their funders think about impact and to embed impact practice at the heart of their work.

The Building Change Trust, as the Northern Ireland partner on the UK board, commissioned Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI) to deliver the Inspiring Impact NI programme. The Trust committed £500,000 to an initial two year programme of work running to December 2015, matched by a further £188,000 from the Department for Social Development, to support VCSE organisations and funders to better understand and embrace an impact focused approach.

One of the principal strands of IINI's work has been the development of a VCSE support programme. For this, the Building Change Trust has provided Building Change awards of up to £15,000 for one year (from September 2014) to enable network/umbrella organisations within the VCSE sector to:

- ★ **Act as impact champions, promoting Inspiring Impact amongst their network/sector**
- ★ **Provide support to a cohort of client/member groups to enable them to understand the impact practice cycle, assess their own impact practice and plan for impact practice**

Through a cascade approach, the aim is to create a ripple effect, spreading the message and support for impact practice as widely as possible across the sector.

A total of 13 organisations have received funding to develop and deliver support across a diverse range of target groups as follows:

<b>Funded organisation</b>	<b>Target groups for the impact support programme</b>
<b>ABC Community Network</b>	Voluntary and community groups in Southern area
<b>Age NI</b>	Age sector
<b>Ballymoney Community Resource Centre</b>	Voluntary and community groups in Causeway area
<b>Community Development Health Network</b>	Agencies and organisations engaged in health and wellbeing
<b>CO3</b>	Third Sector leaders
<b>Holywell Consultancy</b>	Community groups in Derry and Northwest area
<b>National Children's Bureau</b>	Children and family sector
<b>National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)</b>	Local Deaf Children's Societies (LDCS's)
<b>NI Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA)</b>	Voluntary and community groups Northern Ireland-wide
<b>Playboard</b>	School-age childcare organisations
<b>Sported Foundation</b>	Low-capacity organisations in sports development sector
<b>Volunteer Now Enterprises</b>	Volunteer-involving organisations
<b>Youthnet</b>	Youth sector

Within the timescale and resources available for the programme, the focus has been on preparing the sector for impact practice. In adopting this approach, it was acknowledged that changing both thinking and practice around the theme of impact is challenging and will take time. The work has therefore centred around promoting the value of impact practice, and supporting a small cohort of VCSE organisations to engage in the 'planning' stage of the impact practice cycle.

In doing this, the 13 funded organisations are using a range of products developed by Inspiring Impact UK to address the sector's impact needs:

- ★ **Code of Good Impact Practice which defines and codifies what impact practice means from the perspective of a VCSE**
- ★ **Measuring Up!, an online interactive resource designed to assist organisations to assess their impact practice and inform impact planning**
- ★ **Impact Hub, an online platform which provides access to evaluation resources and measurement tools which can be used to support impact practice**

At this stage, the VCSE support programme is at a midway point in its implementation. This Shared Learning paper provides an interim review of achievements to date, and sets out some preliminary lessons which have emerged in relation to supporting the sector to apply and use the Inspiring Impact resources to develop impact practice. The paper is based on individual progress reports produced by the funded organisations, and feedback provided at a collective 'shared learning event' which brought together representatives from each of the 13 projects. A further more detailed review will be undertaken towards the end of the programme in September/October 2015.

## Summary of key achievements to date

- ★ **Key messages about impact practice, Inspiring Impact and the VCSE support programme have been disseminated within the sector**
- ★ **There have been positive responses to the concept of impact practice, which is seen as increasingly important in terms of enhancing organisational development and improving service delivery**
- ★ **Grantholders have adopted a range of approaches to delivering support and developed additional resources and materials to supplement existing Inspiring Impact resources**
- ★ **Some grantholders have been able to link their support to broader organisational or strategic approaches to impact**
- ★ **Over 180 groups have engaged in the support programme delivered by the 13 grantholders**
- ★ **Participants have developed knowledge of the Inspiring Impact resources – in particular, the Code of Good Impact Practice and Measuring Up!**
- ★ **Approximately 40 of the participating groups have assessed their impact practice using Measuring Up! and are working towards the development of an impact plan**
- ★ **Grantholders themselves have benefitted from the opportunity to reflect on their own organisational impact practice**
- ★ **Some grantholders are considering how the experience and learning from the programme can be taken forward strategically, in terms of embedding it in wider organisational development and service delivery to their member/ client groups**



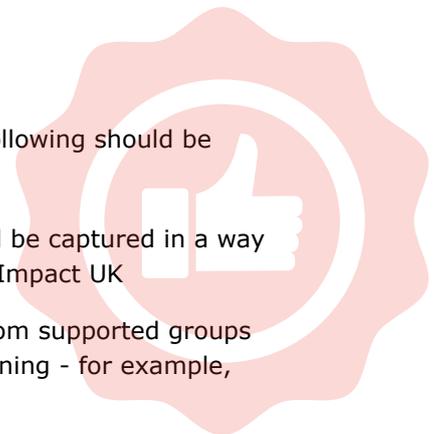
## Preliminary learning

- ★ The experience of participating groups has highlighted the importance of being able to commit resources, including personnel and time, to impact practice
- ★ The 'readiness' of groups to engage in impact practice, operationally and strategically, is critical
- ★ Language related to outcomes and impact can sometimes be perceived as confusing and it is important that terminology is clarified and made accessible and relevant
- ★ The Measuring Up! self-assessment resource provides a means for groups to structure and focus thinking about impact practice and how this might be improved in future
- ★ For small-scale, low capacity/volunteer-led groups, a simplified version of the self-assessment may be more appropriate and relevant
- ★ The programme has demonstrated the value of a driver who can maintain momentum and provide reassurance and encouragement for groups
- ★ As well as facilitation, groups also require technical support in relation to, for example, strategic planning, developing a theory of change, defining outcomes and indicators and measurement tools

## Recommendations

In the remaining six months of the VCSE support programme, the following should be considered:

- 1 The practice examples emerging from the programme should be captured in a way which can be shared with key audiences, including Inspiring Impact UK
- 2 There is a need to gather information more systematically from supported groups about the experience, benefits and challenges of impact planning - for example, through case studies or survey
- 3 The supporting resources developed by grantholders should be collated, reviewed and shared, as appropriate
- 4 It would be useful to identify the types of knowledge/skills which are required to support groups through the impact cycle, to inform any potential future programme
- 5 The experiences and learning from the programme could be used to inform the development of a practical guide to supplement the existing Inspiring Impact resources
- 6 Opportunities should be created to facilitate sharing at different levels, including amongst the supported projects and with funders

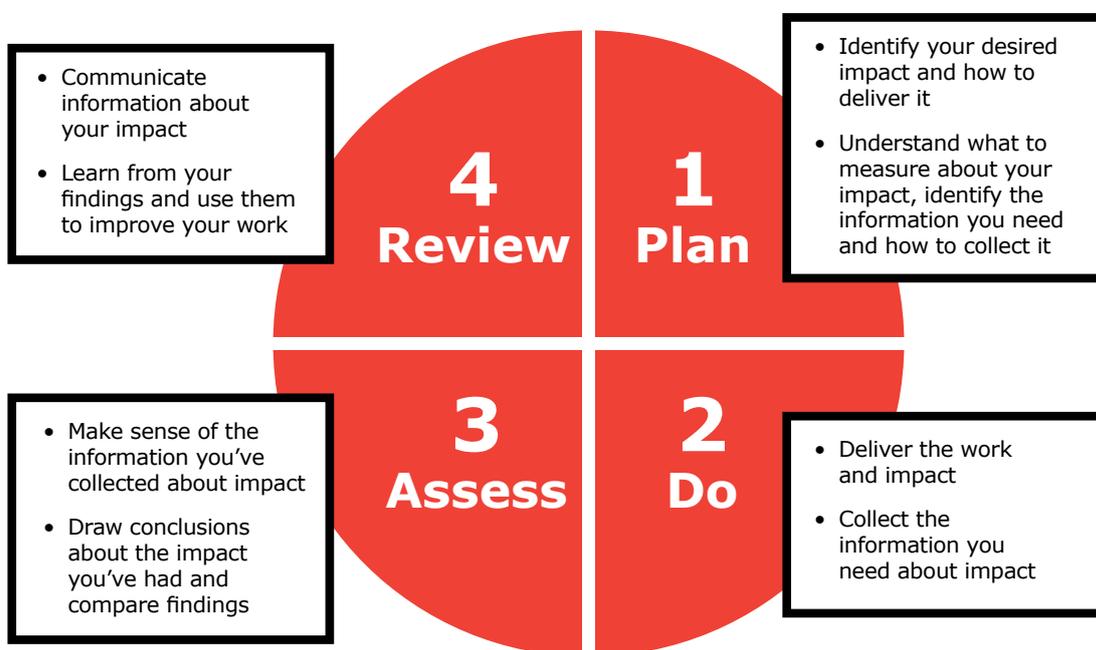


# Implementation of the VCSE support programme: What has been done?

This phase of the VCSE support programme is focused on the first stage of the impact practice cycle - Planning for Impact Practice. The focus is on ensuring organisations understand the concept of impact practice and can access support and resources to help them better plan for their own impact practice.

## The Cycle of Impact Practice

There are four main areas of activity that make up impact practice:



Over its first six months, the roll-out of the programme has involved the following:

## Pre-implementation support to the 13 grantholders

At an early stage in the programme, CENI - in its role as a strategic partner to the Building Change Trust in the delivery of Inspiring Impact Northern Ireland - developed and implemented a programme of support for the organisations which had been awarded funding. This included the development of support materials to supplement the Inspiring Impact resources, the provision of an induction session for all grantees, and on-site support for project deliverers. The support provided was designed to enhance their capacity to act as leaders for impact and to provide impact practice support to their members/client groups.

## Championing

As Inspiring Impact 'champions', the 13 funded organisations have engaged in a range of activities to promote the initiative, the concept of impact practice and the support programme available to the VCSE. These have been carried out both internally within their own organisations, and externally among their client and member groups, and have included the production of flyers, articles and social media, briefings, and awareness raising seminars and events. This has enabled the dissemination of key impact messages at a number of levels - generally within the sector; across locally-based voluntary and community groups within a number of specific geographical areas, at specific target groups including the age sector, children and families, young people and ethnic groups; and amongst a number of thematic groups including sports and faith-based organisations. Grantholders have also promoted the impact message with other stakeholders including statutory bodies in the fields of health, education and youth, for example.

## Recruiting groups

Building on their 'championing' activities, grantholders have also engaged in more intensive targeting and engagement with their member groups to recruit participants. As a result, approximately 180 groups have been recruited to the support programmes delivered by the 13 funded organisations.

## Development of programmes of support

Having recruited cohorts of participants from within their client base or membership, the 13 organisations have developed and implemented their own individual programmes of support. These have been structured around the three key Inspiring Impact resources for the VCSE, and have focused on enabling participants to:

- ① **Understand the Code of Good Impact Practice**
- ② **Self-assess using Measuring Up! and develop impact practice plans based on the results of this**
- ③ **Access and use the Impact Hub to plan for data collection**

This has included developing training events, presentations and supplementary materials, drawing on the Inspiring Impact resources, the materials available through CENI's support programme and their own knowledge of the issue.

There have been different approaches to delivering support, as illustrated by the following examples:

**Age NI**'s impact practice support programme is targeting the age sector. The organisation has engaged with 11 Age Sector Sub-Regional Networks to recruit a small cohort of older people's groups. The programme provided takes the form of one-to-one support and group/peer learning sessions. From the experience, Age Concern hopes to provide models and accessible resources to support the wider implementation of impact approaches in the age sector.

**Ballymoney Community Resource Centre (BCRC)** is delivering its support programme to voluntary and community-based groups in the Causeway area. Participants include both small volunteer-led groups and larger organisations with paid staff, and BCRC has adopted its approach according to the needs of each. While small groups have been facilitated to work through Measuring Up! together, for larger groups, the organisation is running workshops with staff, volunteers and board members around issues such as strategic planning, based on the principles and questions set out in the tool. This information is then being used to complete Measuring Up! at a later stage by a smaller number of participants.

Some grantholders have been able to tie in the Inspiring Impact process with broader organisational or strategic approaches to impact. **Playboard**'s support programme sits alongside a number of strategic developments in the School Age Childcare (SAC) sector, which increasingly require organisations to demonstrate their impacts. Playboard is working with 11 SAC groups and, using the Inspiring Impact resources, as well as a broad range of other materials, participants are being enabled to examine their impact practice within the context of these broader initiatives. Other organisations which have been able to link the programme with existing or developing approaches include Sported, Youthnet, and Volunteer Now.

**NICVA** has engaged in a 'broad brush' approach, delivering four 'masterclasses' to a higher volume of groups, targeted at for example, network/support organisations, those working within policy and lobbying and rural groups. Rather than tailored support, the focus is on raising awareness of the Inspiring Impact resources, and in particular, Measuring Up!; the masterclasses are supplemented by follow-up learning/shared practice sessions with a small number of groups. A similar 'masterclass' approach has been adopted by Volunteer Now and C03; both of these organisations are also providing supplementary mentoring to a small number of targeted groups.

A number of grantholders have developed their own specific resources and tools to support the process of planning for impact amongst their target groups:

- ① **Spoted has developed an electronic Learning Log for supported groups to record progress as they sign up to the Code, complete Measuring Up! and produce a development plan**
- ① **National Deaf Children's Society has assessed the applicability of each indicator in Measuring Up! to the Local Deaf Children's Societies which it is supporting, and created an abbreviated LDCS specific Measuring Up document for groups to complete; NDCS will then support them to enter their information onto the online tool**
- ① **Youthnet recognised a need to translate some of the Inspiring Impact materials into a language which was understandable and could fit into a wider learning process. This has resulted in the production of a resource guide, a workshop plan and a suite of follow-up support**
- ① **Holywell Consultancy has developed an Impact Plan Template which will be tailored specifically to suit the needs of each group**

# Applying the Inspiring Impact resources: some experiences

Through the delivery of the support programmes developed by the 13 funded organisations, participating groups have been assisted to understand and apply the three key Inspiring Impact resources. The following highlights achievements in relation to each of these, and also illustrates some of the challenges encountered.

## The Code of Good Impact Practice

The Code of Good Impact Practice provides broad guidelines for focusing on impact, setting out a cycle of impact practice and a series of high-level principles for organisations to follow.

Through their support programmes, grantholders have presented and explained the Code and facilitated discussions about its practical application. Groups perceived that the Code is *'well thought out and of benefit', 'easy to understand, good practical suggestions'*.

***"Although the principles seemed like common sense there was general agreement that sometimes we overlook some of these principles - especially getting everyone involved; being honest and the need to act upon your findings"***

However, there are also challenges in understanding the Code, particularly in terms of language: *'terminology is not familiar to front line staff - so raising awareness of the language around it takes time', 'participants are unfamiliar and unconfident with the language ... find it academic and theoretical without relevance to their focus on practical implementation or examples'*.

Grantholders also identified some of the practical challenges for groups in applying its values and principles, particularly in terms of limited time resources, skills and knowledge:

***"A number felt that putting the Code into Practice document was better suited to larger groups, rather than smaller and/or newer community/voluntary groups"***

## Using Measuring Up! and developing impact plans

Measuring Up! is a straightforward, step-by-step online self-assessment tool designed to help organisations review and improve their impact practice. It takes users through a series of questions about their existing practice in terms of the four stages of the impact cycle – plan, do, assess and review - and helps to generate an action plan for developing impact practice within the organisation. It also includes guidance and links to additional resources which can be used to support the assessment and planning processes.

At this stage in implementation of the VCSE programme, all of the supported groups have been introduced to Measuring Up!; approximately 40 of them have completed the self-assessment process and are progressing towards developing an impact plan for their organisation.

The work undertaken to date has generated positive feedback on the Measuring Up! tool:

***"Attendees were very positive about the Measuring Up! tool, particularly with the Guidance and Resources window, which gave clear explanations"***

***"Useful because it asks the right questions to focus thinking ... organisations like the Measuring Up! report, as it is accessible and easy to use"***

In particular, applying Measuring Up! has provided groups with an opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses in their existing impact practice, particularly in terms of identifying the outcomes and impacts of their work:

***"Participants realised that they haven't mapped out the difference they actually make, with participants all saying that they didn't have a theory of change and weren't aware that they needed one. Most had aims they wished to achieve but didn't fully get a sense of what the wider outcomes and impacts are for the children, families and communities which benefit from their services"***

Supported projects saw the potential for application of the tool to support organisational development:

***"The timing was very good ... some were embarking on developing new strategic plans and looking at impact practice alongside their planning has been very beneficial for them"***

***"Some groups have immediately recognised the benefits of this resource as a practical tool to assist with developing not only new programmes or projects but also new ways of delivery"***

The information generated was also seen as informing promotional activities, including engagement with funders:

***"Several have indicated that they will be able to use the pie charts from their report in future funding applications, and use the self-assessment as a means of reviewing their Impact Practice as part of any progress reports"***

Some grantholders commented on the perceived relevance of the self-assessment process particularly in light of capacity issues amongst groups. This included concerns about appropriateness to the scale of some: *'particularly smaller groups on the ground felt that it was too daunting and that they weren't in a position to complete it at present or that it was above the level that they needed'*. The tool was also seen as repetitive in parts, and could have benefited from being *'streamlined or simplified'*. The concept of developing a Theory of Change, as promoted in the process, was also seen as technically challenging for some. The online nature of the resource presented some difficulties for groups with low ICT capacity/ competence.

As part of good impact practice, grantholders have encouraged groups to bring together different stakeholders to work through Measuring Up!; this has included facilitating sessions involving staff, volunteers and board, and committee members. This was seen as valuable in promoting engagement in the process across the group, and supporting momentum:

***"See this as a chance for everyone to take responsibility for overall impact ... will help to build better working relationships and create a real feeling of teamwork "***

***"This hands-on, group-specific support has seen an increase in support and momentum for impact practice within each group ... one group has displayed their piechart report of Measuring Up on the notice board as you enter their building, in order to inspire and engage the whole group with the process"***

However, it was also recognised that engaging stakeholders and securing buy-in was often difficult, particularly for some of the primarily volunteer-based groups with which grantholders were working, but also within the context of budgetary cuts and potential job losses within those organisations with paid staff.

Grantholders also highlighted the need to dedicate time to the process: *'Measuring Up! is a detailed process requiring people to give time and commitment to it'; 'it requires a fundamental change in how organisations approach and organise internally'.*

There are also challenges in terms of the readiness of some groups to engage in the process of impact planning; in such cases it has been necessary to provide preliminary support in preparation for applying Measuring Up!

***'It has been a more intensive support process to date having to address gaps such as no strategic plan, vision or mission and lack of understanding of outcomes, outputs, impact and how to report effectively''***

The input provided by grantholders was seen as crucial in guiding and supporting participants through the process and in maintaining momentum. The availability of a dedicated resource enabled groups to avail of flexible, responsive support, tailored to their particular needs:

***"This resource has enabled us to respond flexibly in engaging with the groups and support them, given their time restraints as volunteer led and driven groups"***

Organisations have reported that having an external facilitator and having committed to the Inspiring Impact programme exerts positive pressure on them to complete the Measuring Up! self assessment, in particular.

***"It has become clear that approaches need to be quite fluid – one size most certainly does not fit all!"***

The role of the funded project worker included reassuring and encouraging groups about the results which were being generated through the exercise, sometimes drawing on their own experience of completing Measuring Up!: *'Some groups were concerned by their performances, however we were on hand to reassure them that this was natural and this was a baseline on which they could build'.*

Where grantholders have brought groups together, this was seen as providing a valuable opportunity for sharing experiences and learning.

## The Impact Hub

The Inspiring Impact Hub is a one-stop shop for impact resources and tools. It pulls together a range of resources relevant to improving impact practice, and enables users to search and filter results according to their needs.

At this point in the programme, many of the participating groups are not yet at the stage of identifying data collection tools; the focus has therefore been on raising awareness and demonstrating the potential of the Impact Hub. Grantholders have also drawn on their own knowledge and experience to signpost groups to potential resources (including their own organisational-based tools).

Amongst those groups which have engaged with the Hub, the resource is seen as *'a very useful tool ... participants have said that they would like to look around it in more detail as they progress through the programme'*.

However, concerns have been expressed about accessing and utilising some of the resources highlighted, particularly in terms of cost. Some organisations have also commented on the range and scope of resources, including the availability of Northern Ireland-specific materials. Some projects were *'interested in being able to add their own resources to be part of Impact Hub catalogue'*.

# Next stages in the VCSE support programme

The VCSE support programme will operate until October 2015. During this time, the 13 funded organisations will be continuing to deliver their support activities, particularly in terms of maintaining the level of engagement and momentum which has been initiated. A number also have plans for showcasing their work towards the end of the funding period through, for example, the development of case studies and resources for dissemination across their target groups.

Over the remaining months, it will be particularly important that, as a new initiative which is testing out the process of supporting the VCSE to plan for impact practice, the experiences and learning from the programme are reviewed, documented and shared more broadly. In this context, the following is recommended:

- 1** The work to date has provided practical examples of supporting the development of impact practice in the VCSE sector which have relevance to other grantholders, Inspiring Impact UK and more broadly. In the final few months, it will be important to ensure that these practice examples are captured in a way which can be shared with key audiences.
- 2** While some grantholders have reported on feedback from supported groups, it would be useful to gather information more systematically and directly from participants about their experiences of the support provided and the benefits, challenges and learning from impact planning – for example, through case studies or survey.
- 3** A number of grantholders have developed their own materials and resources to support the delivery of the programme to member / client groups. It would be important that these are collated, reviewed and shared, as appropriate, in the first instance amongst the funded projects, but also potentially more broadly with other partners involved in Inspiring Impact.
- 4** In terms of feeding into the development of any future support programme, at this stage it would be useful to engage with grantholders to identify and reflect on the types of knowledge/skills which are required to support groups not just to use the Inspiring Impact resources, but more generally through the impact cycle.
- 5** It would be valuable to use the experiences from the VCSE support programme to inform the development of a publication or resource to supplement the existing Inspiring Impact resources.
- 6** Feedback at the VCSE learning event highlighted the potential for providing opportunities for supported groups to share their impact practice experiences. It would be useful to identify creative and practical ways of facilitating connections amongst supported groups; for example, through webinars, virtual workshops.
- 7** The event highlighted that while impact practice should not be funder-driven, there is a connection between the approaches to monitoring and evaluation adopted by funders and the motivation of funded groups to engage in impact-focused planning and reporting. A shared learning event, involving both the IINI VCSE / funders projects, would be a useful first step in helping to raise mutual awareness and understanding about the challenges which both funders and the sector face in implementing an impact-focused approach, and the progress which has been made in addressing these.

Notes



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