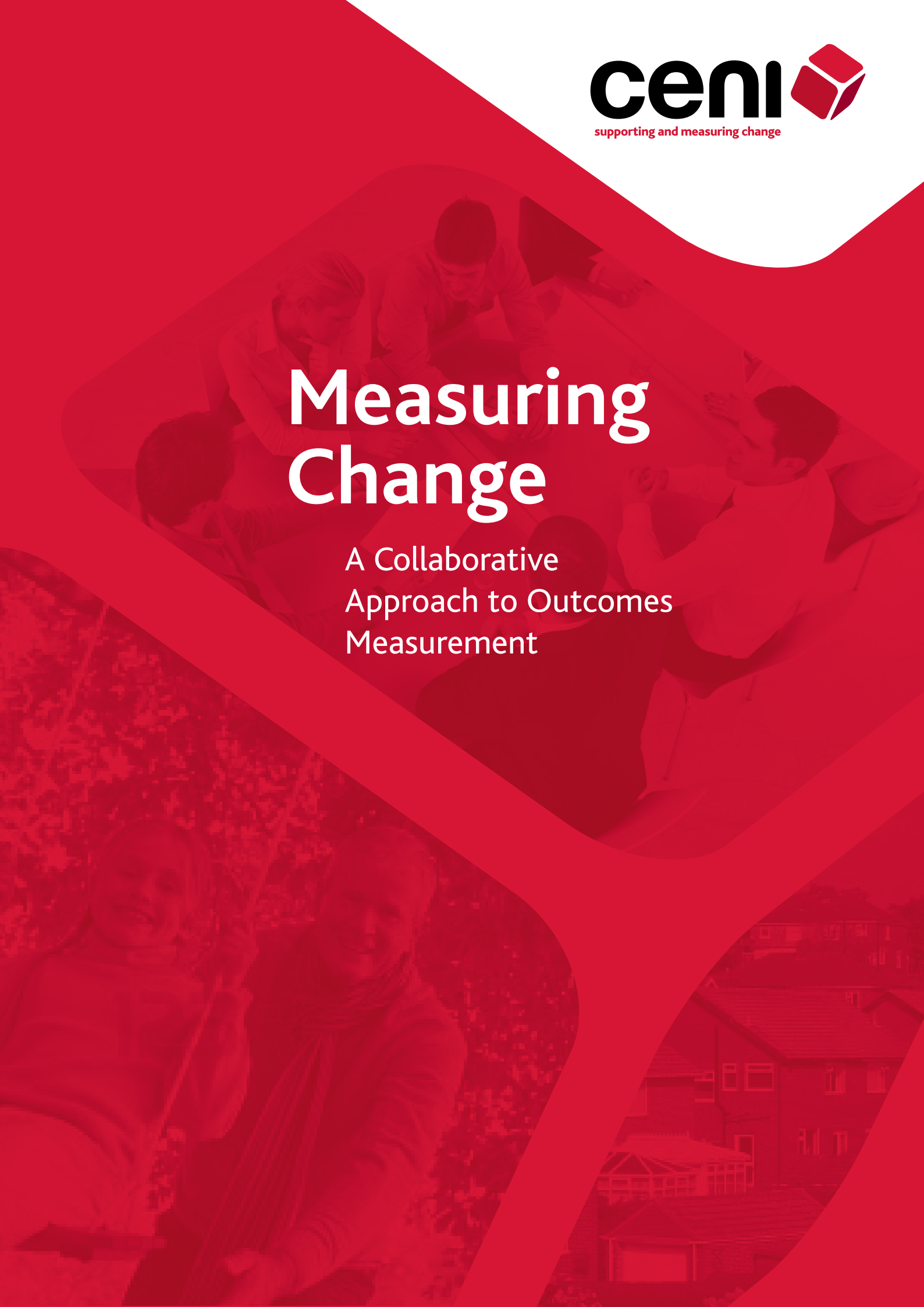
ceni
supporting and measuring change



Measuring Change

A Collaborative Approach to Outcomes Measurement

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Measuring Change

An Overview

In a climate of financial austerity and increasing social need, public funders and those they fund are faced with the challenge of measuring and communicating the impact of their interventions. However, recent research shows that:

- Most existing funder evaluation systems tend to focus on counting activities and ensuring financial probity - they are not designed to measure outcomes;
- Evaluation approaches are not standardised so it is difficult to add very diverse individual project outcomes together to show overall programme impact;
- The cost of implementing comprehensive, robust and standardised outcomes systems can be prohibitive and could easily 'crowd out' resources needed elsewhere.

The challenge has been to address these issues within current financial constraints. A number of social impact measurement tools have emerged such as 'Social Return on Investment' (SROI) which attempts to put a monetary value on the contribution made by voluntary and community organisations. CENI, on the other hand, has sought to focus on capturing and measuring qualitative change. Developed with support from the Building Change Trust, 'Measuring Change' provides a practical, robust and cost-effective approach to capturing the hard-to-measure qualitative outcomes of community-based programmes. The approach involves two distinct but connected components:

1. Developing an overarching framework of programme-level outcomes and,
2. Applying an innovative method to measure project baseline and change against these outcomes.

Underpinning the approach is the involvement of both programme and project stakeholders in a collaborative process facilitated by CENI.

The Outcomes Framework

Developing a programme outcomes framework involves the following:

- **Strategic Focus:** Facilitated sessions with programme stakeholders, coupled with review of project documentation, helps to rationalise a 'theory of change' for the programme and articulate specific change outcomes.
- **Structure/Themes:** The process helps identify key programme themes which give shape and structure to an outcomes framework. This provides a common format within which the diversity of project-level outcomes can be located.
- **Stakeholder Involvement:** It is essential that the development process is informed by input from both the projects and the programme team; this helps to foster a sense of shared ownership of the outcomes framework that evolves.

'Traditionally, the approach has always been looking at what has been done at the end of the programme, but the research and other developments are showing that this needs to be built in at the beginning'. VCU

'At project level, people do know how to do some of this - they can talk about outcomes - but there is a need to look at how to cascade upwards. For government, this is increasingly crucial within the current climate and environment. There has to be realisation that it is not about one size fits all'.
BELFAST CITY COUNCIL

Data Collection

Project data is collected using 'Nominal Group Technique' which draws on the perspectives of different stakeholders to reach a consensus on baseline and change measures against the identified outcomes. The key elements are:

- **Multiple Perspectives:** A crucial feature is the involvement of a range of stakeholders – partners, management, staff, volunteers and users – in a facilitated 'Expert Panel'. This maximises involvement and enables 'triangulation' of evidence.
- **Facilitation:** The role of the CENI evaluator as a 'critical friend' ensures equality of input across all these stakeholders, challenging and testing their perspectives and providing clarity and transparency.
- **Measurement Scale:** The use of the Rickter numerical scale (0 - 10) helps panel participants to visualise the baseline assessment, neutralise contentious debate and reach consensus.
- **Critical Debate:** The peer-to-peer debate amongst stakeholders helps to foster candid discussion and critical review within panels. The outcomes framework is culled from their own outcomes statements and so challenges them to focus on what can be achieved and to be realistic about their contribution to change.

Data Analysis

The systematic application of the data collection method across multiple projects within a programme generates robust quantitative and qualitative data. This can be analysed:

- **Horizontally** to measure the progress of individual projects across the programme;
- **Vertically** by aggregating project data to show collective progress, thus providing an indication of overall programme impact.

The following case studies illustrate how Measuring Change has been successfully piloted by CENI across a number of funding programmes:

- The approach was used to support a diverse range of projects funded by the **Big Lottery Fund** to baseline and measure change.
- **Belfast City Council** used Measuring Change to inform re-design of a funding programme and to help support change management.
- With the **Neighbourhood Renewal Programme**, it was employed to identify and baseline Community Renewal outcomes.

The approach is readily transferable to other funding programmes operated by Government or independent funders.

Case Study 1

The Big Lottery Fund - Supporting Projects to Baseline and Measure Change

Need

In May 2010, the Big Lottery Fund NI commissioned CENI to provide evaluation support to two strategic programmes. The purpose was to develop and test a baseline methodology 'that would enable the projects funded through the 'Live and Learn' and 'Safe and Well' programmes to evidence their own impact'. There were 36 funded projects (17 'Live and Learn' and 19 'Safe and Well') each funded up to £1 million to be delivered over five years.

In addition to supporting the funded projects it was also important to consider ways in which the baseline and change information gathered could be aggregated at programme level to get a sense of the overall achievements of each programme.

Process

The scale and diversity of the projects, across the two programmes, presented a challenge and required a methodology which was affordable and straightforward to use but sufficiently robust to produce useful evidence at project and programme level. A standardised approach needed to be developed and applied systematically across all projects.

- Drawing on project documentation and consultations with the Big Lottery Fund programme teams, a common outcomes framework was developed consisting of 24 outcomes structured across four themes i.e. People, Place, Organisation, Relationships.
- CENI then supported projects to baseline and measure change against the 24 outcomes. This involved facilitating the projects using Nominal Group Technique to come to a collective agreement on progress against the stated outcomes.
- Applied systematically and consistently across all the projects, this facilitated the generation of robust evidence in a standardised format. The quantitative and qualitative information recorded was circulated to the groups for further analysis and use within their project.
- 27 of the funded projects participated in the exercise, involving almost 270 stakeholders including partners, managers, staff, volunteers and users.
- CENI also facilitated a group session with the Big Lottery Fund programme teams which provided additional insights into priorities and challenges.

'Things came up on the day that will further feed into external evaluation plans.'

Achievements

This process has helped develop Measuring Change as a new approach to identifying and measuring outcomes and test this with a very diverse range of projects across two major Big Lottery Fund programmes. With respect to the original Terms of Reference set out by the commissioner CENI has:

- Supported projects to identify and measure baseline data in a standardised format across both programmes.
- Provided projects with quantitative and qualitative baseline data enabling them to chart progress, evidence the difference they are making and disseminate to their participating stakeholders.
- Helped inform project strategic planning and development processes and how to enhance their existing self-evaluation systems.
- Generated standardised data robust enough to generalise across diverse projects and so provide an indication of collective progress or programme change.
- Produced a rich source of qualitative information with the potential for further analyses and learning across a number of common themes.

'It reinforced outcomes and helped to refresh thinking and foster new ideas and activities'.

'Very useful for reminding us about some of the priorities, beyond the day to day running of the project ... it certainly reminds me of what my priorities are and potentially which ones you can lose sight of'.

Case Study 2

Belfast City Council - Supporting Programme Design and Managing Change

Need

Belfast City Council's (BCC) Capacity Building Programme currently funds 17 support organisations across the city. Having operated for a number of years, and against the backdrop of a changing policy and financial environment, the Programme is being reviewed.

In planning for a revised support programme, the BCC team responsible wanted help to design in outcome measurement from the outset. Strategically, they saw a need to link the proposed programme with the broader outcomes of the Council's Strategy for Community Development and its Corporate Plan. Operationally, the development of outcome measures was seen as providing a means of aligning projects and programme, and helping to ascertain assessment criteria for funding allocation.

Process

The Measuring Change approach was used to develop an overarching outcomes framework which articulated specific changes a revised programme would be expected to achieve. This involved the following:

- Application forms and monitoring data from organisations funded under the existing arrangements were trawled to identify a preliminary set of outcomes.
- Over the course of three sessions, CENI facilitated the BCC staff team to refine and rationalise the outcomes into key programme themes.
- The draft framework identified eleven outcomes which were structured into three programme themes.
- In order to test the relevance of the framework, CENI facilitated the BCC team to estimate the baseline position of a small sample of funded projects against the identified outcomes.

Having completed this initial development work, it is intended that there will be a process of wider consultation to further refine the framework prior to its incorporation into any revised programme.

'The difficulty is that we can keep doing the same things all the time but there is limited positive change, so this is about helping to think about what needs to change'.

Achievements

In this example, applying the Measuring Change approach:

- Has helped clarify what the BCC team wanted a revised support programme to achieve – the rationale, purpose, intended outcomes and assessment criteria.
- Has drawn on projects' existing outcomes and involved the relevant BCC staff to inform the process and ensure ownership of the outcomes identified.
- Has informed planning for a transitional process from the current situation to the implementation of a revised programme.
- Has provided a mechanism to help identify and assess support needs amongst currently funded projects during any proposed transitional period.
- Will inform and support future engagement between BCC staff and funded organisations to help align project activity with programme outcomes.
- Will ultimately support the measurement of baselines and change and improve reporting on the impact of any investment made through a revised programme.

'This programme has a real opportunity to make a difference: agreeing what that difference is now will allow us to select which projects have the best chance of supporting positive change and also to identify what ongoing assistance council needs to deliver alongside the grant'.

Case Study 3

Neighbourhood Renewal - Identifying and Baselining Community Renewal Outcomes

Need

The interim evaluation of the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme (2010) identified that the Community Renewal pillar of the programme did not have adequately defined outcome indicators, making an assessment of progress difficult. CENI drew on its Social Assets research (2008) to inform the development of an outcomes framework for Community Renewal, and then piloted this with a sample of Neighbourhood Renewal Areas using the Measuring Change approach.

Process

- Informed by the Social Assets model and consultations with the Neighbourhood Renewal teams a draft outcomes framework consisting of 14 outcomes across five themes was produced.
- To pilot the framework three 'clusters' of Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRA) were selected. Local neighbourhoods within each of the NRAs were identified and mapped. This ensured that any internal diversity was represented and captured.
- Expert Panels were identified and established for each of the three clusters. These included Neighbourhood Renewal staff, statutory partners, and community representatives.
- CENI facilitated these expert panels to produce quantitative and qualitative baseline data against the 14 outcomes for all the identified neighbourhoods.

'Staff involvement in the design was important and is helping to improve the outcome. There has to be involvement at this level so that we can see what needs to be done to achieve something'.

Achievements

The pilot study illustrated how Measuring Change can be applied within the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme to:

- **Inform Programme Evaluation:** The systematic production of area baseline data provides a basis for measuring change in an area's asset base over time. This 'social asset' data coupled with existing social needs indicators would provide for a more comprehensive assessment of change as a result of community interventions funded by Neighbourhood Renewal.
- **Profile and differentiate between areas:** The baseline data can be analysed to distinguish between areas, map their 'asset' profiles and inform possible interventions.

  For instance, an area with low baseline scores may indicate a need for basic community development interventions to build its asset base. Other areas with high baseline scores, could indicate greater potential for engaging in service delivery or other social/economic partnership initiatives.

CENI has submitted a proposal to 'roll out' the baselining exercise across all 36 Neighbourhood Renewal Areas in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

CENI's work on Measuring Change has been both developmental and experimental. The learning derived will inform the potential future application of the methodology as well as contribute to the building of a wider body of knowledge on evaluation and outcomes measurement.

Policy makers and funders now have access to a tried and tested method that could be replicated and adapted. Government funders, such as DSD, DARD, and Belfast City Council are currently exploring the potential application of Measuring Change within their community programmes.

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