

Experiences and Learning from the Scottish Outcome Agreement Pathfinders

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Introduction

1. This paper sets out the learning that can be drawn from the Outcome Agreement (OA) pathfinder project that took place over 2006-2007 to inform the roll-out of Single Outcome Agreements to all local authorities in Scotland. The paper highlights potential for further learning to emerge from the pathfinder process and that there is a continuing role for the pathfinder Councils in the new national approach.

Background and Context

2. Four local authorities were acting as pathfinders. These were:

- East Renfrewshire Council
- North Lanarkshire Council
- South Lanarkshire Council
- West Lothian Council

3. Each pathfinder council developed a draft version of an OA during the first few months of the pathfinder. The initial drafts varied in scope and focus. West Lothian Council's OA covered the full range of Council Services; North and South Lanarkshire Council's OAs focused on a selection of existing ring-fenced funding streams ("ROA-plus" approach); and East Renfrewshire followed a model which covered a range of Council and Partner areas of work subject to ring fenced funding and based on the outcomes of the East Renfrewshire Community Plan Update, which was currently in development.

4. A series of meetings began in March 2007 to begin more detailed discussions on how the pathfinders should be taken forward. At the last pathfinder meeting on 28 August 2007 the pathfinders were advised that a proposal to roll out SOAs to all local authorities in Scotland was being considered.

5. In terms of identifying and disseminating learning from the pathfinder process, there are a number of lessons that can be drawn. However it should be noted that in August 2007, the pathfinders were reaching a crucial stage in the development of their SOAs and it would have been desirable for the pathfinders to progress a little further to test out some of the principles of OAs before considering the learning points.

Learning Point 1: Scope and Focus of Outcome Agreements

6. As outlined in paragraph 3 the drafts varied in scope and focus. Pathfinders report that the approach to the OA was easier when focusing on a relatively small number of key objectives at the initial proposal stage. Latterly the clarity on the five national priority areas was helpful in focusing the OAs.

Key Message 1

Local authorities / partnerships should have a realistic range and focus for Outcome Agreements and this should be clearly defined at an early stage.

Learning Point 2: Value of Metrics

7. One of the key elements that will determine the success of an Outcome Agreements approach is developing a sophisticated, robust approach to identifying outcome measures and setting stretching targets. In particular the development of appropriate local outcome measures should not be left to individual councils to develop independently. A Metrics Group was established to discuss the data issues underlying the Outcome Agreements. The Office of the Chief Statistician (OCS) became involved in the pathfinder initiative at a relatively early stage and provided valuable advice on data sources, the definition of a good outcome measure and target setting methodologies.

8. The pathfinder Councils agree that the Metrics Group was useful to be able to discuss data issues collectively and ensure common approaches. The involvement of the OCS has been very useful to date and their involvement in Outcome Agreements should continue to ensure that the arrangements for measuring outcomes are robust and meaningful.

Key Message 2

Appropriate specialist support for developing the performance measurement arrangements for Outcome Agreements is essential to achieving a common understanding of the requirements for an effective, robust performance management framework.

Learning Point 3: Engagement with Scottish Government Departments

9. During the course of the pathfinder development, it proved difficult to co-ordinate meetings between policy leads in pathfinder Councils and the relevant policy leads within the Scottish Government. The pathfinders view this element of the development of Outcome Agreements as crucial to ensure that there is an effective process for negotiating outcomes and targets directly between the appropriate policy leads.

10. It should be noted that the pathfinders did not gain sufficient opportunity to engage with policy leads to give greater depth to the outcome approach in key service delivery areas (one meeting of all pathfinders and key representatives from Scottish Government departments took place).

Key Message 3

Consideration should be given to how outcomes and targets will be negotiated effectively between Scottish Government and local authorities during the national roll-out of OAs and how this will enable variation between areas.

Learning Point 4: Interim Freedoms and Flexibilities

11. At an early stage in the pathfinder process, the pathfinder authorities identified potential interim freedoms and flexibilities (for example, reduction in reporting requirements) that would free up capacity within their organisations to develop their Outcome Agreements. The nature of the freedoms and flexibilities requested

required input from a range of Scottish Government departments, including the Justice and Health departments. In most cases, the deadline for the relevant reporting requirement passed without any response being received regarding the request for flexibility. Ultimately the pathfinders did not benefit from any interim freedoms and flexibilities during the process.

Key Message 4

It is difficult for local authorities to implement a new policy approach while also meeting existing requirements. Some consideration as to how local authorities can be enabled to meet the new national requirement for SOAs would be useful.

Learning Point 5: Benefits of SOAs

12. There were a number of discussions during the pathfinder process about the benefits of SOAs for the pathfinder Councils. These were articulated in a feedback letter from the Scottish Government to the pathfinder Councils, however this was received very late in the process. It will be beneficial for the Scottish Government, local government and local partners to be aware of the benefits of an SOA approach at the beginning of the process to ensure buy-in and commitment.

Key Message 5

A clear statement at the outset of any new national approach on the benefits of SOAs will assist the process. It should also be established at the outset how the success of the new approach will be measured.

Learning Point 6: Commitment at Local Level

13. In East Renfrewshire there was high-level political buy-in from an early stage with the Leader of the Council actively pursuing pathfinder status. At Council service level there is evidence of concern about the loss of ring-fenced funding for their own areas of work and this could have implications for the level of buy-in from Council service departments. Community planning partners in East Renfrewshire, although supportive of the principle of an Outcome Agreement, need further clarification of what is in it for them.

14. A high level of buy-in locally (at political level, service level, and from community planning partners) is beneficial in aiding the development of an Outcome Agreement.

Key Message 6

Commitment locally, at Council service, partner and political levels, is essential to the success of an Outcome Agreement approach for the whole of the public sector and consideration should be given to how this commitment can be fostered.

Conclusions

13. A number of learning points have been identified from the pathfinder process – some are positive elements of the process that should be incorporated in the national roll-out and others are challenges that need to be resolved. Again these

learning points should be considered in the context that the pathfinder process did not run to its intended conclusion and there wasn't sufficient time to identify solutions to those challenges that presented.

14. However there is potential for further learning to emerge from the pathfinder process. It should be noted that in rolling out the approach to all 32 Councils, most will have a very different starting point from the pathfinder Councils. Those Councils that have been involved in the pathfinder process can provide a useful insight to some of the challenges that might arise at each stage and contribute to resolving these.

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