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 **foyer** Project 6 - Aberdeen Foyer: an impact journey

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Social impact management: exploring managers' perspectives

In this Briefing Paper we summarise some key findings from the first phase of Project 6, during which we asked managers of Third Sector organisations to share their perspectives on social impact management

Background and context

In Briefing Paper Number 9, we noted that social enterprises, charities, and community organisations are increasingly under pressure to provide evidence of their organisational performance to funders and other internal and external stakeholders. In order to comply with reporting and accountability requirements, managers of Third Sector organisations find themselves having to oversee the process of collecting data associated with their service delivery.

Project 6 was undertaken in partnership with Aberdeen Foyer, a leading social enterprise in Scotland. Foyer was established in 1995 in response to the issues of youth homelessness and unemployment in Aberdeen City. The purpose of this project was to co-create a social impact management process to enable Foyer to make more effective and efficient use of the data they gather, and facilitate more robust and meaningful reporting.

In preparation for our work with Aberdeen Foyer, we started the project with some exploratory research among employees and management staff in a range of Third Sector organisations. This enabled us to deepen our understanding of how social impact management activity is perceived, undertaken and experienced at delivery, operational and strategic levels.

In Briefing Paper Number 9, we focused on the challenges client-facing service delivery employees encounter when engaging with social impact management tasks. In this Briefing Paper, we turn our attention to managerial perspectives on social impact management activity.

Study overview

Our study was undertaken in six Third Sector organisations in North East Scotland. These organisations were all engaged in the delivery of projects and interventions relating to various aspects of health and wellbeing, housing, substance misuse, learning, employability, early intervention or family support. Two of the organisations in the sample identify themselves as social enterprises; one as a small-scale local charity; and three as local branches of larger national charities.

A total of 20 interviews were conducted with operational and strategic-level management staff. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded. Analysis of the interview data was undertaken using a thematic approach.

Our findings

Analysis of the interview data led to the following insights into managerial perspectives on social impact management activity:

More than just reporting

There was widespread agreement among the managers regarding the value and importance of collecting evidence of their organisational impact. However, this was coupled with a recognition that resource constraints often led to a focus on collecting only what was required by funders or donors. Constraints of time, money, expertise and IT resources left little scope to take stock and analyse data from an organisational perspective in order to learn from what had been achieved, or what had not worked so well. It was clear from the interviews that there was a willingness and desire to do more than simply report to stakeholders, but that managers were not really sure how to set about it.

Many funders, many tools

The managers expressed similar frustrations to the delivery staff about the range of data recording and reporting tools and techniques they have to use when working with multiple funders. The short-term nature of some funding streams only served to exacerbate the problem of having to switch from one tool to another. Managers noted that this was time consuming and inefficient. They also stressed that this meant it was difficult to aggregate data across the various programmes and projects running within an organisation. This, in turn, made analysing and reporting on organisational performance cumbersome and complex.



Feedback and communication

A common grumble among the managers we interviewed was that there was limited active engagement with some funders, and in particular, a lack of feedback from funders regarding reports submitted. Managers felt there was more scope for interaction with funders and indicated that they would value more of a relational, rather than a transactional, approach to the funding process. Such interaction would enable appropriate outcomes and data collection mechanisms to be discussed and agreed at the outset of projects or programmes. In addition, managers felt that through interaction with funders, meaningful feedback could be received and discussed in response to reports to facilitate organisational learning and continuous improvement.

Impact management is not easy

The managers we interviewed all indicated that impact management can be a difficult and complex undertaking. Some noted, for example, that the wide range of tools and resources available to choose from was bewildering. Others commented that they had encountered very few tools that facilitated straightforward data aggregation and in-depth data

analysis. For others, the biggest issue seemed to be gathering and collating data from a wide range of staff within their organisation, often within tight timeframes to meet reporting deadlines.

Employee wellbeing and motivation

It was very evident from the discussions with managers that they were deeply committed to their service delivery staff and were acutely aware of the pressures they faced in their day-to-day work. Managers recognised that for many service delivery staff, data collection and reporting tasks constituted an added pressure. Some managers also acknowledged that given the nature of their client-focused roles and their individual skillsets, some delivery employees did not relate well to data management activities, and so in some cases did not perceive them as priorities. This sometimes led to tensions when reporting deadlines were looming. Integrating data management activity into staff workflows was a challenge, and managers indicated that any impact management processes or systems put in place needed to take account of employee types, and the nature of their core duties.

A few of the managers we interviewed suggested that more use could be made of client stories, particularly success stories, not simply for external reporting and

promotional purposes, but also internally for motivating and encouraging staff. Managers noted that staff retention was difficult in the Third Sector, and that it was important to find ways to show staff how their work was valued and to ensure staff were made fully aware of the difference their work was making to the lives of clients and communities. Again, processes and systems that could facilitate this sharing of stories would be welcomed by the management staff we engaged with.

Language barriers

Whilst not always raised specifically or explicitly by managers, a further issue that became apparent during our discussions with managers was that there is sometimes a mismatch in the language and terminology used to talk about social impact management. The language of funders, and in some cases, management, can seem alien to client-focused employees and does not resonate with how they communicate about their work. For example, funders and management, with their focus on reporting, might speak in terms of targets, monitoring, and evaluation, whereas the delivery staff tend to use what could perhaps be perceived as softer language. These staff might refer, for example, to client journeys, distance travelled, difference made, and evidence of change.



Summary: towards an organisational impact management culture

Taken together with the insights gained from our interviews with client-facing delivery staff reported in Briefing Paper Number 9), our interviews with Third Sector managers provided us with some clear points to consider when working with Aberdeen Foyer to co-create a social impact management process. In particular, we noted the following:

- The need to ensure that social impact management activity had both internal and external relevance, to meet reporting requirements and also to facilitate organisational learning and contribute to continuous improvement;
- The need to undertake a systematic analysis of available social impact management resources,

and to develop a means of navigating those resources in order to be able to select the right tool (or tools) for the job;

- Fostering an organisational culture of social impact management requires the buy-in of service delivery staff. Being mindful of the language used to communicate social impact management activity is likely to be key to achieving this. The sharing of client stories is also likely to be an important motivating factor for employees.
- Any resources selected, or processes put in place, need to align closely with the working environment of employees in order that impact management tasks are not burdensome, but rather become a meaningful part of the daily workflow.

Concluding remarks

As we noted at the start of Briefing Paper Number 9, the findings of the 2017 Social Enterprise Census indicate that *“the area of support most widely requested relates to help with measuring social impact”*. Of the 1,037 social enterprises responding to this question in the census, 44% stated that they would benefit from help with this aspect of their work in the following 12 months. The findings of our two preliminary studies of service delivery employees and management staff undertaken as part of CommonHealth Project 6, shed some light on the nature of the support that might be valued by social enterprises, and indeed other Third Sector organisations. This includes support in understanding the range of impact management resources available; managing funder relationships; making impact management meaningful to employees; learning from data gathered and impact reported; and fostering and embedding an organisational social impact management culture.

In our next Briefing Paper from Project 6, we share our story of working with Aberdeen Foyer to co-create an impact management process and to being the task of evolving an impact management culture across the many projects and programmes Foyer delivers.

¹ Coburn, J. (2017) Social Enterprise in Scotland: Census 2017. Glasgow: Social Value Lab. www.socialvaluelab.org.uk



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