



**realising
ambition**

Commissioning possible

Meeting the challenges of evidence-based commissioning

**Realising Ambition
Programme Insights: Issue 7**

Programme Insights: This series of Programme Insights shares reflections, learning and practical implications from [Realising Ambition](#), a £25m Big Lottery Fund programme. Realising Ambition supports the replication of evidence-based and promising interventions designed to improve outcomes for children and young people and prevent them from entering the youth justice system.

Rather than writing a long evaluation report at the end of the five-year programme, this series provides people with information about the programme while it is happening.

Our field guides, including this one, are practical 'how to' guides. Words highlighted in blue are defined in the glossary.

About us: The Realising Ambition programme is managed by a consortium committed to improving outcomes for children. It is led by [Catch22](#), alongside the [Dartington Social Research Unit](#), [Substance](#) and [The Young Foundation](#).



Realising Ambition Programme Insights: Issue 7

Introduction and background

This Programme Insight is designed to support [evidence-based commissioning](#). It is informed by the principles of evidence-based commissioning, the 22 Realising Ambition delivery organisations' practical experience of engaging commissioners with their Realising Ambition offer and the reflections of a small number of commissioners. We provide an overview of some of the key issues evidence-based commissioning is presenting to the on-the-ground commissioner. We then offer learning from Realising Ambition to help them address the very real and complex set of challenges being faced as commissioners are increasingly tasked with achieving more in their local area for less.

In Realising Ambition we learnt that successful [replication](#) requires strong organisations delivering strong services in the right context. To enable us to assess the relative strengths of each of these components we combined two existing resources, the [Standards of Evidence](#) and the [Organisational Health Scorecard](#), into one: the Realising Ambition Confidence Framework. We believe the framework can assist commissioners to make more informed decisions about which services and which organisations can best help achieve better [outcomes](#) for their population. It is particularly valuable in this time of ongoing cuts, as commissioners face difficult decisions about which services will achieve the impact they require in preventing young people from offending.

Part One: The case for evidence-based commissioning

In 2010 the UK government, and subsequently the National Audit Office, outlined eight principles of good commissioning. ([Principles of Good Commissioning](#). National Audit Office). These were intended to create efficiency gains and better outcomes for individuals and communities by encouraging 'smarter, more effective and innovative commissioning, and optimal involvement of voluntary sector organisations in public service design, improvement, delivery and accountability'.

Eight principles:

1. Understanding the needs of users
2. Consulting potential providers
3. Putting service outcomes at the heart of the process
4. Mapping the range of potential providers
5. Considering investing in capacity building
6. Ensuring contracting processes are transparent and fair
7. Ensuring long-term contracts and risk-sharing
8. Seeking feedback from service users, communities and providers.

These principles have been adopted by an increasing number of public sector organisations. They have informed the way commissioning now largely works and whilst challenges still exist - which we will explore later - there are few commissioning bodies that would not subscribe to them.

Commissioning in this context extends beyond the procurement of services and is designed to support the achievement of strategic aims.

Accordingly, commissioners' focus is on understanding the [needs](#) of users and the outcomes they want to improve, and being aware of the range of organisations that can deliver the personal or social changes identified. Commissioners have hard decisions to make in engaging services that can improve outcomes for increasingly diverse communities and populations with a complex range of needs.

Consequently, commissioners have to assess the capability of their range of service providers and identify the organisations that are able to meet required standards for governance, financial management and outcome reporting.

Our experience has shown that commissioners also need to be confident that the services they procure are tightly defined, adaptable and provide a sustainable, impactful solution to a community's needs. (See Programme Insight 1, *The Secret Life of Innovation: Replication*, for details of key service features and see Programme Insight 5, *Turning the Lens*, for details of key organisational features necessary to deliver them.)

Evidence allows commissioners to assess these aspects of services and delivery organisations. It also helps them to identify needs of users and the outcomes they want to improve.

Evidence-based commissioning supports the imperative for taxpayers' and donors' money to be used judiciously and underpins an aspiration to ensure that all resources invested in services for children and young people represent value for money.

Feedback from Realising Ambition delivery organisations suggests that public sector commissioning is increasingly informed by evidence and there are a number of examples where the principles of good commissioning are being observed. One conversation with a commissioner based in a Realising Ambition replication area illustrates this approach very well.

A commissioner's tale

I work as a commissioner in a local authority public health team. There is a strong culture of evidence-based commissioning in our sector,

The commissioning process, firstly, enables me to identify where there's a need for a service. Usually I consider providers that are already delivering appropriate outcomes (although not necessarily in our geographical area) and are accredited and **evaluated**, where appropriate through a randomised controlled trial.

My colleagues and I are aware of providers nationally who offer specific services that might fulfil our goals, in some cases they may be the only provider but this must be clearly demonstrated as the case. In light of this, there are occasions where we will approach potential service deliverers proactively; where this is not the case the open tender process is used.

We examine the organisational strength of the provider by requiring them to evidence their ability

to deliver the service and the quality of systems they have for measuring outcomes. They need to be able to demonstrate that they are appropriately experienced, and have the track record to deliver. Providers are required to measure output and demonstrate outcomes. Requirements for measuring outcomes and Key Performance Indicators are set out in the contract and are used to assess the performance of the provider of the service.

I try to build strong, honest relationships with service managers in organisations before and during the procurement process, although we usually only get to know the delivery staff after decisions about which organisation we will commission have been completed.

Regarding recommissioning, the local authority won't do this as a matter of routine. Those who have previously been commissioned will always need to re-bid for work and must demonstrate that they have been delivering against targets.

As we will explore later, whilst most Realising Ambition organisations acknowledged that there had been some movement towards commissioners assessing the evidence base of services, they believed the focus on evidence and outcomes varied tremendously. They suggested that although some commissioners were interested and leading the debate locally, others still did not prioritise outcome-based commissioning at all. Realising Ambition delivery organisations tell us that they often perceive local commissioners as being too stretched to have the time to appropriately implement an evidence-based commissioning process. Other factors, such as pressure to support existing local service providers, make this even more difficult.

The experience of Realising Ambition's delivery organisations suggests that despite offering commissioners well-developed services with strong evidence of impact and strong evidence of organisational capability, many commissioning decisions appear to be made based on price and fewer on the basis of evidence. Fewer commissioners have appeared to be in a position to engage in discussions about cost-benefit for instance, an area we will cover in a forthcoming Programme Insight. That is not to say that no Realising Ambition organisations have had good experiences of evidence-based commissioning – some have, but the feedback we are getting is that these appear patchily.

This gap between the theory of evidence-based commissioning and its practical application is, we believe, the result of a real dilemma for commissioners. Do they procure a service that is cheaper but has a weaker evidence-base, if evidence at all, or do they procure a more expensive option which they are more confident will achieve promised outcomes? As austerity tightens around public spending, is the imperative to consistently choose the cheaper option cemented? Do commissioners have the necessary time and resources to implement an evidence-based commissioning process? Additionally, does every commissioner have the tools to assess the relative strengths of one service against the other or whether an organisation has sufficient capability to deliver?

In these circumstances, the construction of coherent commissioning and measurement frameworks continues to be challenging for commissioners at a local level. This is especially true if the aim is to fund inter-related public services which are mutually supporting. In this case, commissioners will need to look for organisations that are sufficiently skilled and adaptable to help shape the configuration of services.

And as each stage of the commissioning process continues to produce a wealth of quantitative and qualitative data – both on service users and their needs and on service outcomes and impact – commissioners need to be more and more finely tuned to existing and emerging need, to knowing the range of potential providers who can contribute and involving them in each stage of the process.

The Realising Ambition programme has been primarily concerned with putting service outcomes at the heart of the process and many of the delivery organisations have become more realistic about their own service and less likely to over claim blanket success. There has been an improved understanding of service impact, how evidence is captured through the logic model and why outcomes are sometimes achieved and at other times are not. As a consequence, many of the targeted services delivered by Realising Ambition organisations report outcomes which remain stable and sometimes worsen. They can confidently argue, however, that this is not necessarily a failure of the service but may be evidence of the need for it.

The concern of Realising Ambition delivery organisations is, however, that the broader supply side organisations will overclaim success and maintain they have of a host of characteristics, from being underpinned by a strong and robust logic model to having strong and flexible organisations which never fail to deliver. While commissioners' understanding of evidence-based commissioning may have strengthened, they do not necessarily have the skills or knowledge to distinguish between one offer and another and to determine which claims are substantiated or not.

Consequently, later in this Programme Insight we will provide commissioners with new tools to equip them to ask the right questions about delivery organisations and the services they offer to help determine which may best fulfil desired outcomes.

Yet before we do that, we will further review the experience of the Realising Ambition portfolio in the light of the developing evidence-based commissioning agenda.

Realising Ambition's experience of commissioning

When Realising Ambition issued its call for interest in 2010, over 240 organisations from across the UK applied to deliver one or more of 25 services within the programme. Following a lengthy two stage selection process, 22 organisations were successfully 'commissioned' to deliver their service(s) over the following three to five years.

The 25 services were, we believe, representative of the diverse nature of those working in the UK children and young people's sector. They included large national organisations as well as small locally-based charities. The services similarly were very different, split evenly between school, family and community-based approaches, some of which were universal services and others more targeted. Just under half of the services supported had an international evidence base and the rest were home grown in the UK.

Each of the organisations also received intensive support from the managing consortium. The support was aimed at making the delivery organisations even stronger and more resilient and sought further to improve the evidence base for their service, partly to enable them to make a case to sustain it.

In the context of evidence-based commissioning, the organisations and their services should be in a strong position to be sustained in the grant-funded areas and further replicated or scaled in new geographical areas. We wanted to examine how an increasing focus on evidence-based commissioning

across the UK might have impacted on the local experience of these strong organisations which deliver strong services.

Sustaining services

Most of the Realising Ambition delivery organisations will be sustaining their services post-funding in some form or another. As figure 1 overleaf illustrates, 15 of the 25 services will be sustained in replication areas initially funded by Realising Ambition. However, post-funding, none of the organisations have been able to sustain service delivery across all replication sites. Thirteen organisations have secured funding in new replication areas in which to deliver their service. Most organisations are reliant on a blend of finance from directly commissioned work underpinned by additional grant funding to continue to sustain delivery. Of the six services not currently being delivered post-Realising Ambition, three have ceased to be replicated in the form of standalone services but have been brought into the core of the organisations' offers. The organisations that delivered the remaining three continue to try to secure finance for these services' further replication.

Figure 1: Service sustainability post-Realising Ambition.

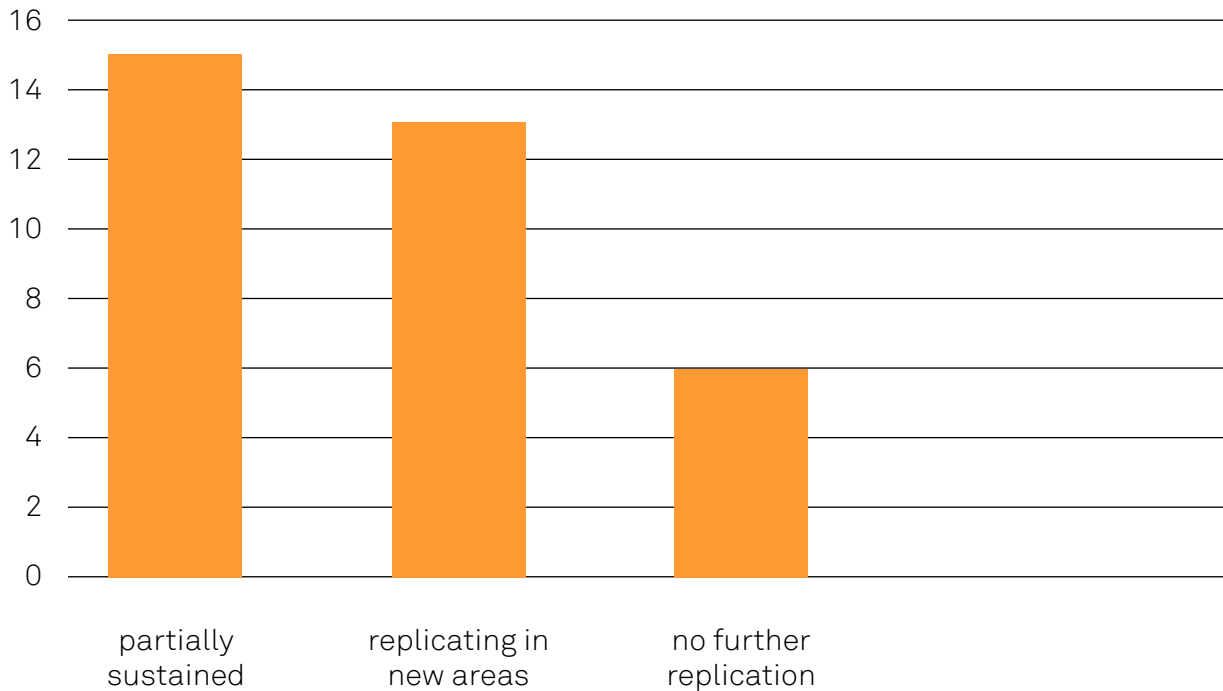
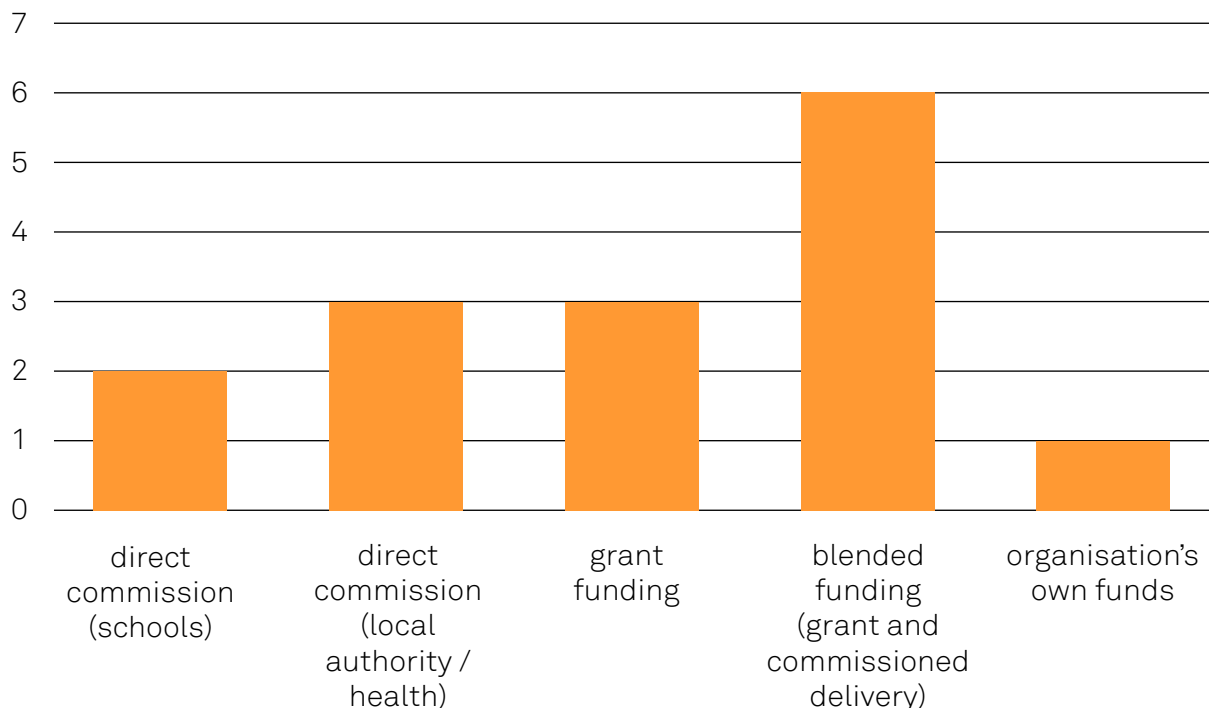


Figure 2 illustrates the funding base for those services being replicated or sustained post-funding. For the most part, the Realising Ambition delivery organisations have developed an area by area approach and, anecdotally, for some it has been the case that applying for funding to subsidise delivery costs in an area has been the trigger for engaging local commissioners.

Figure 2: Funding base of sustained services.



How uniform is the approach to evidence-based commissioning?

Through semi-structured telephone interviews over a week in October 2016, we gathered the Realising Ambition delivery organisations' reflections on their experience of marketing their service and engaging commissioners. As we have stated, Realising Ambition organisations acknowledge that there has been movement towards commissioners assessing

the evidence-base of services and indicators of organisational strength. However, they consistently told us that there is a patchy approach to evidence-based commissioning in practice. Over the course of Realising Ambition, there have been some very real frustrations but some organisations have been involved in excellent commissioning processes. This is illustrated by Action for Children's delivery in Renfrewshire which is described below.

Realising Ambition delivery organisation's perspective: James Cantley, Action for Children

[Action for Children](#) supports the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK. One of our key programmes is [Functional Family Therapy](#) (FFT), a form of intensive family therapy for young people who are at risk of entering custody or care, and their families. It builds on the existing strengths of family relationships and improves communication and parenting skills, reducing problem behaviour such as drug use and violence.

Within Realising Ambition, we delivered FFT in Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Scottish delivery took place in Renfrewshire where we had delivered services for 15 years and had a strong working relationship with the council. Renfrewshire Council then directly supported the implementation of FFT, embedding the programme into its social work practice, and committed to exploring funding the service in the future.

In 2014, Renfrewshire Council commissioned a £420k programme to enable Action for Children to continue to deliver FFT post-Realising Ambition for three to five years.

But why did this commissioner chose FFT? Action for Children has displayed a commitment to and an ability to introduce programmes that deliver positive outcomes. We were well known to Renfrewshire Council for delivering services that addressed its strategic priorities, meeting the needs of the community that it placed importance on, such as anti-social behaviour, offending and family coping. We forged and grew a strong relationship with the council and key people within it, such as the director of social services who has been a strong advocate of FFT.

Being outcome focused has built Renfrewshire Council's confidence in Action for Children and FFT. It was interested in the programme producing both individual and family outcomes, and our ability to rigorously evidence positive outcomes in both of these areas was a significant reason for the council investing in the programme.

The council was also convinced that FFT was good value for money, as the programme fitted in with its wider assessment of the cost-benefit of services provided to local people.

Some organisations suggested that although some commissioners were interested and leading the debate, others still did not make time for evidence-based commissioning at all. Some Realising Ambition organisations thought this was often because of the multiple contracts commissioners were managing at any one time. One organisation said that:

‘It takes too much time just to understand how a service works let alone whether it has a good evidence base.’

A converse explanation, however, could be that this also represents the challenge some providers have in succinctly making a clear case for what they do, and how the service may enable the commissioner to achieve the outcomes they want to achieve.

Another organisation, which focuses on engaging schools, was mostly critical of head teachers’ understanding of evidence and outcomes. While they had tried to engage head teachers – who are effectively commissioners – in discussions about what constituted good evidence, it had become clear that this marketing strategy was unlikely to deliver any new commissioned work. The organisation changed its strategy from focusing on evidence of outcomes to presenting case studies about individual progress, supported by references from other commissioners who had good knowledge of the service.

It was suggested that this was a short-term strategy and necessary before they could engage potential commissioners and lead a conversation about outcomes and evidence. A consistent theme from Realising Ambition organisations delivering directly to schools has been that schools are more receptive to a marketing strategy which talks to the heart as much as to the head.

So, as these examples illustrate, whilst commissioners may subscribe to the theory of evidence-based, outcomes-focused commissioning, some do not implement this in practice. This suggests that practice is rather less clear-cut at the point of procurement than at strategic level.

Part Two: Evidence is confidence

In Realising Ambition we have grappled with problem of differentiating one service from another, albeit from a provider perspective. Over the course of the Realising Ambition programme, we learned that evidence should focus on delivering positive outcomes, on organisational strength and on the ability to adapt to new or challenging contexts. Our maxim is: evidence should be used to improve a service, or an organisation, not just prove it works. Our experience is that the sector often uses evidence in a static and hierarchical way, when in fact it can be used to identify what adaptations could make a service and its provider more effective.

To help us articulate a rather more nuanced approach to evidencing a service and the organisation’s ability to deliver it, we developed the Realising Ambition Confidence Framework (formerly referred to as the Evidence-Confidence Framework). It is a tool to help delivery organisations, funders and commissioners understand services’ and delivery organisations’ strengths. It helps identify where development or refinements may be made to either. It can also be used to support the case for sustaining, replicating or scaling a service.

The framework is structured around our five-part definition of successful replication, introduced in the first issue of this Programme Insights series:

- a tightly defined service;
- that is effectively and faithfully delivered to those that need it;
- evidence is used to learn and adapt, as required;
- there is confidence that outcomes have improved; and
- the service is cost-beneficial and sustainable.

As Realising Ambition developed, we saw that this more sophisticated approach was required to effectively guide and support organisations in delivering services in new, different and changing contexts. We learned the following:

- Refining or delivering services in a new context requires a careful balance of faithful delivery

of the core elements of a service, with a degree of careful adaptation to its [surface elements](#) to ensure a good fit for a new context, including those challenges created by financial constraints.

- The generation of evidence is not a sequential or hierarchical – as is suggested by some adaptations of the Standards of Evidence (SoE) with its five upward facing steps.

Developed by Dartington Social Research Unit, the SoE is a set of standards that can be applied to determine which services work in improving children and young people's outcomes.

Realising Ambition's experience has also taught us that the organisational aspects of service provision are just as important as those that are concerned with the service itself. To effectively deliver an evidence-based service requires strong leadership within an organisation in order to understand new delivery contexts and learn which adaptations are required to improve impact. A delivery organisation should also have the necessary infrastructure to support and develop its delivery teams. It's not just the service that requires assessment by the commissioner – the capability of the organisation is just as crucial.

The SoE does not allow for the organisational aspects of the service to be considered so we used the Young Foundation's Organisational Health Scorecard (OHS), a resource for reviewing the strengths of delivery organisations. Adapted specifically for use in Realising Ambition and the context of replication, the OHS helped to identify development support needs of the programme's delivery organisations as well as helping to consider the strength of the business case for the service being replicated.

In Realising Ambition we initially tried to separate the service and the organisational aspects of replication by using the OHS and SoE as distinct

tools to appraise organisations and services respectively. We found, however, that these two elements were too closely connected to be considered in isolation. Consequently, we integrated aspects of the OHS and SoE into the Realising Ambition Confidence Framework as one tool for appraising both organisational and intervention aspects of service delivery.

Whilst we are still testing, refining and strengthening the framework, it is nevertheless usable in a commissioning context. It can provide an overview and assessment of evidence related to a variety of aspects of a service, not just its potential impact on outcomes. It can also indicate to commissioners how capable an organisation is to deliver a proposed service effectively, while identifying areas for the refinement and adaptation of a service to local circumstances.

The Realising Ambition Confidence Framework is, we believe, a tool that can help commissioners scratch beneath the surface of the potentially bewildering array of evidence that they might be presented with in regard to a service and its provider.

All Realising Ambition organisations emphasised the importance of their existing relationships and acknowledged that a busy commissioner would be unlikely to have information about all providers that are well placed to achieve their goals. Whilst this highlights the importance of maintaining relationships, it also underlines the following: if a delivery organisation has tools to demonstrate a robust approach to commissioners, it helps them to establish the level of confidence and trust required to progress relationships, including in new delivery areas. Anne Frank Trust UK is one organisation which uses such tools to engage commissioners. They and others within the Realising Ambition programme report that commissioners have responded positively and the tools have provided a platform for developing work in new areas.

Anne Frank Trust UK

At the [Anne Frank Trust UK](#), our experience of the support that the Realising Ambition consortium has given us has been invaluable in helping us grow and develop as a small charity. It has helped us to professionalise our offer and to communicate our programmes to funders and commissioners in a better way.

Our logic model, which Dartington Social Research Unit helped us develop, has supported us to create evaluation tools to effectively measure the impact of our programme. Over the past few years, we have built up a good picture of the impact of our programme, and our approach has recently been recognised by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission. We have been able to show the value of our work to new and existing funders, and our organisation is in a good position financially for the next few years thanks to new funding. We are able to demonstrate that we understand how to evaluate our work in robust way, and we believe that this gives funders confidence in our work.

Our impact evaluation has also informed our communications strategy, which has given us a shared language to describe our organisation.

The OHS has been a brilliant tool for us. It has allowed us to see our strengths and, more crucially, our weaknesses, which has allowed us to concentrate on improving those. We frequently use the scorecard spidergram in our applications to funders, to show that our organisational health has been measured and has improved over the years, showing our funders that we have a strong structure and that we take care to work on our weaknesses.

As an organisation, we are in the middle of great creativity as we develop and test new programmes and ideas. We have been able to take the tools and techniques that the consortium has guided us through to these new programmes, and we are confident that we will have better defined and implemented programmes than we would have done otherwise, and much quicker too!

Inside the Realising Ambition Confidence Framework

When designing the Framework, we translated the five key ingredients for successful replication into the following five measures of an organisation's ability to deliver a quality service while increasing its impact and scale:

- Service design: the activities comprising the service are logical and clearly articulated.
- Service delivery: the activities are effectively and properly delivered.
- Monitoring: data collection is scheduled and routine, and the service provider is clear about how evidence is used to learn and adapt service delivery, as required.
- Determining benefit: there is confidence that the service will improve outcomes.
- Organisational strength and sustainability: the service provides value for money and the organisation can deliver it sustainably.

These are the five measures of a strong service and organisation that commissioners can use to begin to determine what they need to procure to fulfil the needs and priorities that exist within their area.

However as they stand, these five measures themselves are not enough – most, if not all, providers will claim that they tick every one of the five boxes. Consequently, we tested and trialled a number of indicators to help us evaluate how well each measure is met in order to achieve a more nuanced and specific view of individual services and organisations, as illustrated in figure 3.

For example, having a logic model is not enough to know if the activities comprising a service are logical and clearly articulated. The Realising Ambition Confidence Framework asks the commissioner to ascertain whether the logic model is fully supported. It does so by encouraging them to identify indicators that describe how support is provided.

Figure 3: Scoring the indicators of the logical design measure provides an overview of that measure.



Each indicator is scored with colour coding to designate the level of confidence the commissioner might have in that aspect of a service or organisation. For example see figure 3, red for the indicator ‘outcomes are routinely monitored’ in the monitor measure means “there is no attempt – or only an inconsistent or unstructured attempt – to monitor the outcomes of participants.” On the other hand, green means “evidence on outcomes is used to inform the refinement of the intervention.” This is illustrated in figure 4.

Figure 4: An overview of a hypothetical project and the definitions of the colours for the ‘outcomes are routinely monitored’ indicator.

To improve quality, increase impact and scale:						
Design	The activity is logical and clearly articulated	The activity is supported by a theory of change	The core structure of the activity is well defined	Components within the activity are clearly specified	Delivery is supported by a written guide or implementation handbook	The activity has the potential for scale
Deliver	The activity is effectively and properly delivered	the intended audience is involved in the activity	Realistic delivery targets can be met	The core of the activity is delivered as designed	The activity is delivered by qualified and motivated staff in appropriate roles	The delivery of the activity is quality assured
Monitor	Evidence is used to learn and adapt, as required	Outcomes are routinely monitored	The proportion of the activity received is routinely monitored	Flexible components of the activity are identified, adaptations made and tested	Staff and beneficiaries are involved in shaping the activity	Learning and approaches are shared
Determine benefit	There is confidence that outcomes have improved	The theory of change of the activity is underpinned by research evidence	Evidence generated in other sites (organisations or locations) suggests the activity improves outcomes	It is possible to effectively gather, analyse and communicate evidence	Evidence generated in other sites (organisations or locations) suggests the activity improves outcomes	There is evidence of wider positive benefit
Sustain	The activity provides value for money and is sustainable	There is evidence that people value and are satisfied with the activity	There is evidence the activity is value for money	There is a compelling business case for replicating the activity	The activity is fully integrated into core business of the organisation	Delivery of the activity is sustainable

Outcomes of children and young people are routinely monitored	Outcomes refer to the ‘impact’ or change that is brought about in a young person, such as a change in behaviour, social and emotional skills, employability or citizenship. The routine measurement of all (or a representative sample) of participant outcomes allows an organisation to test whether outcomes move in line with expectations. Outcomes are ideally measured using a questionnaire or assessment tool that is scientifically reliable and valid (i.e. it has been shown to consistently measure what it sets out to measure). Ideally, outcomes are systematically measured before and after an intervention in order to assess change.		There is no attempt - or only an inconsistent or unstructured attempt - to monitor the outcomes of participants.
			Standardised measures or bespoke tools have been adopted to monitor outcomes before and after the intervention but are not systematically administered.
			Standardised measures or bespoke tools are used to monitor outcomes but they are not administered to a representative group of beneficiaries (i.e. they are un-systematically administered) and/ or post-intervention response rates are low (less than 70%).
			Standardised measures are used to monitor outcomes to a representative group of beneficiaries and post-intervention response rates are high (over 70%).
			Above plus...
			Evidence on outcomes is used to inform the refinement of the service.

Next steps and conclusions

The Realising Ambition Confidence Framework is still under development. It has been designed, tested and refined across a number of audiences and potential user groups and has been warmly received so far. We would not recommend using the tool to provide an overall score or create an objective rating (which many other tools already attempt to do). The tool is most valuable when commissioners and providers use it to explore services' and their delivery organisations' ability to achieve outcomes while identifying areas for development, adaptation and refinement. We emphasise that this should be used as a dynamic engagement tool to support commissioning.

Realising Ambition will be making an adaptable version of the framework available online during the summer of 2017.

However, in the meantime we have taken the key areas that the framework explores and have adapted them to produce a commissioner's checklist. (See overleaf).

This checklist provides a simplified guide to the key characteristics which the framework addresses, and commissioners can use it to make an assessment of the relative strengths a provider and their service offers. It is also a guide to the areas in which a commissioner and provider can work together to further improve the public services designed to address need and improve outcomes.

In conclusion, understanding what a provider and their service bring to local public services is vital for achieving and improving outcomes. Confidence that a provider and their service can deliver promised outcomes while contributing to the wider development of local services is fundamental. Consequently, a provider must evidence to a commissioner not just impact and effectiveness in the here and now, but also the skill and the will to improve further. The Realising Ambition Confidence Framework supports this process by providing a basis for commissioners and providers to build trusting, collaborative relationships with a mutual focus on improving outcomes.

Commissioner's checklist

Service design

- Are the activities comprising the service logical and clearly articulated?
- Is it supported by a logic model?
- Is the core of the service well defined?
- Are service activities clearly specified?
- Is delivery supported by a manuals and associated staff training?

Service delivery

- Is the proposed service clearly configured and likely to be delivered properly?
- Is it clear how eligible beneficiaries that need the service are served?
- Has how they will be met been considered?
How will the provider ensure the core of the service is delivered with fidelity?
- Is the provider able to convincingly illustrate the service is delivered by qualified and motivated staff in appropriate roles?
- Are the governance arrangements for delivery of the service robust?

Monitoring and learning:

- Is data collection scheduled and routine and is the service provider clear about how evidence is used to learn and adapt service delivery, as required?
- Are outcomes routinely monitored and used to inform implementation?
- Are [retention](#) and [dosage](#) routinely monitored and used to inform implementation?
- Are flexible components of the service identified, and are adaptations made and tested?
- Are learning and approaches translated across the delivery organisation?

Determining benefit:

- Is there confidence that the service will improve outcomes?
- Is there evidence from other places that the service improves outcomes?
- Is the delivery organisation able to effectively gather, analyse and communicate evidence?
- Does the service complement and add value to the local delivery landscape?
- Is there evidence from the current replication areas that the service improves outcomes?
- Is there evidence of wider positive impact?

Organisational strength and sustainability:

- Does the organisation make a compelling business case for replicating the service?
- Is there evidence that the service and its delivery team are fully integrated into the organisation?
- Does the organisation demonstrate that it has the leadership and robust financial and organisational structures to support replication of the service in your area?
- Does the service provide value for money and can the organisation deliver it sustainably? Is the organisation able to provide an analysis of unit costs and an estimated financial return on investment?

Key Learning Points

- **The principles of good commissioning are being applied by an increasing number of commissioners, but too many decisions are based on price.**
- **There has been some movement towards commissioners assessing the evidence-base of services and indicators of organisational strength, however this is patchy.**
- **Evidence should be used to improve a service, or an organisation, not just prove it works.**
- **Building strong relationships between commissioners and service providers is critical, but this takes time.**
- **The Realising Ambition Confidence Framework is a dynamic tool that can help commissioners to assess the strengths of an organisation and the effectiveness of its service.**
- **The Framework can also help to identify areas for refinement and adaptation of organisations and services.**

Glossary of Terms

■ Core elements

The key activities that make the service work. Put another way, the specific aspects or mechanisms of a service that lead to the desired change in outcomes. For a service to be replicated successfully, providers need to be clear about what can and cannot be changed.

■ Dosage

Refers to the 'amount' of programme or service a person receives. This could be the number of total sessions attended, the length of those sessions, or how frequently they took place.

■ Evaluation

Various aspects of a programme can be evaluated, including the process of delivery, user satisfaction and impact. In this briefing evaluation refers to the use of social research procedures to investigate systematically the effectiveness of programmes or services in terms of improving children's health and development.

■ Evidence

Generally speaking, evidence is information that acts in support of a conclusion, statement or belief. In children's services, this tends to be information indicating that the service works, ie is achieving the intended change in outcomes. We take a broader view in that evidence may support or challenge other aspects of service delivery, such as quality of implementation, reach and value for money, as well as organisational health.

Glossary of Terms

■ Evidence-based commissioning

The process of establishing an evidence-base to identify needs within a target population and developing policy directions, service models, and the market in services, to meet those needs in the most appropriate and cost-effective way. (Adapted from Drugs and Alcohol Findings, 2016.)

■ Impact

The impact (positive or negative) of a programme or service on relevant outcomes, ideally according to one or more robust impact evaluations.

■ Logic Model

Explains how an intervention is designed to work and why it could achieve the desired outcomes – it is often represented in a diagram with a supporting narrative.

■ Need

In relation to services for children and families, this refers to how many individuals in a specified population match the target group for the programme.

■ Organisational Health Scorecard

A resource developed by the Young Foundation for reviewing the strengths of delivery organisations.

■ Outcomes

Outcomes refer to the 'impact' or change that is brought about, such as a change in behaviour or physical or mental health.

■ Replication

Delivering a service into new geographical areas or to new or different audiences. Replication is distinct from scaling-up in that replication is just one way of scaling 'wide' – ie reaching a greater number of beneficiaries in new places.

■ Retention

The task of keeping participants involved in a study to complete assessments and procedures as outlined in the study protocol.

■ Standards of Evidence

A set of standards developed by Dartington Social Research Unit that can be applied to determine which services work in improving children and young people's outcomes.

■ Surface elements

Those aspects of a service that may be altered, refined or adapted in order to foster greater engagement, retention or satisfaction of those in receipt of a service (yet do not disrupt the underlying core mechanisms of the service or intervention).

Further Reading

We have drawn on many sources in the production of this Programme Insight. Our top picks for further reading on the themes discussed are listed below.

- Principles of Good Commissioning. National Audit Office: <https://www.nao.org.uk/successful-commissioning/general-principles/principles-of-good-commissioning/>
- Commissioning for better outcomes: a route map. Local Government Association: <http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/5756320/Commissioning+for+Better+Outcomes+A+route+map>
- Commissioning In Local Government. Local Partnerships: <http://localpartnerships.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Commissioning-in-local-government-BD.pdf>
- A better return: setting the foundations for intelligent commissioning to achieve value for money. National Programme for Third Sector Commissioning: http://b.3cdn.net/nefoundation/6059c7f32debc02156_dem6iys0l.pdf
- Beyond Big Contracts: Commissioning public services for better outcomes. Institute for Government: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/Beyond%20Big%20Contracts.pdf>
- Commissioning for better outcomes. Barnardo's: <http://www.barnardos.org.uk/commissioning-for-better-outcomes.pdf>
- Better Outcomes, Better Value: The evolution of social impact bonds in the UK. Bridges Ventures: http://bridgesventures.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/SIBs_Better-Outcomes-Better-Value-print-view.pdf
- Life Chances Fund. Cabinet Office: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/551993/2016_09_life_chances_fund_guidance.pdf

You can find a full list of additional resources we have drawn on at the Realising Ambition website: catch-22.org.uk/realising-ambition. This will grow as the series of Programme Insights develops.

Find out more

**catch
22**

realisingambition@catch-22.org.uk
catch-22.org.uk/realising-ambition

substance.

neil.watson@substance.net
substance.net/case-studies/realisingambition



**DARTINGTON
SOCIAL
RESEARCH
UNIT**

tim.hobbs@dartington.org.uk
dartington.org.uk

**THE
YOUNG
FOUNDATION**

james.teasdale@youngfoundation.org
youngfoundation.org

