The Improvement Service

Elected Member Briefing Note No.1

Single Outcome Agreements

Elected Member Briefing Notes are provided by the Improvement Service (IS) to help Elected Members keep apace with key issues affecting local government.

Contents

What they are

Single Outcome Agreements (SOAs) were introduced in the Concordat between COSLA and the Scottish Government (SG) in November 2007 which resulted in the removal of almost all ring fencing of local government expenditure. First phase SOAs were agreed between all Councils and the SG in June 2008. In February 2009 all Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) will present a second phase SOA to the SG, for agreement in May 2009.

The SOA Guidance for CPPs explains that the SOA is:
"the means by which CPPs agree their strategic priorities for their local area and express those priorities as outcomes to be delivered by the partners, either individually or jointly, while showing how those outcomes should contribute to the Scottish Government's relevant National Outcomes."

Why they matter

SOA's present local government with a major opportunity to work with its partners to identify and deliver key priorities for their area. SOAs put:
•   results for communities and service users at the heart of service delivery
•   councils firmly in the lead in the joint planning and delivery of public services in their area

The 2nd phase SOAs are to be signed by the Council, and its statutory partners - the Health Board, the Police Board, the chief constable, the Fire Board, the regional transport partnership, Scottish Enterprise or HIE - and by a Scottish Minister on behalf of the Scottish Government. Other public bodies in the CPP may also be invited to sign the SOA as can local third sector and private sector partners. Endorsement of the SOA by these partners may be important for many local partnerships to demonstrate their openness to these bodies being part of the delivery of the outcomes and priorities set out in the SOA.

The partners will be signing up to supporting all of the outcomes set out in the SOA, not just some.

At minimum, this means that the Council and all partners are:

1.   signing up to the whole SOA, not selected parts of it.
2.   that signing up is equivalent to adopting the SOA as a formal corporate commitment of the Council or Board.
3.   that such a commitment is to support the delivery of the SOA in all possible ways compatible with their statutory powers and duties.
4.   that all partners are willing to review their pre-existing structures, processes and resource deployment to optimise delivery of outcomes (within the statutory framework).

What this patently does not mean is that each partner is signed up to deliver all of the services and infrastructure necessary to achieve the outcomes as none of the partners have unrestricted general empowerment.

What it does mean is that each partner is corporately committed to the agreed outcomes for the area and its people and, within the constraints of their statutory framework, will take every opportunity to promote and support the achievement of the outcomes.

In practical terms this means, for example, that the Health Board should not undertake economic development activities: rather that it should use its position as a major employer within the area and as a major purchasing body to support the economic development outcomes as set out in the SOA.

What they mean for Elected Members

Elected Members have a key role in providing both knowledge and leadership working with your officials and partner organisations to ensure that the local potential of the SOA is realised. All Members can apply their local knowledge to help ensure that the SOA is relevant to local needs and is capable of delivering the intended results. Providing leadership will be particularly important for Members who are involved in CPPs or who sit on the boards of partner bodies. Members who occupy such roles will be in a strong position to advocate the benefits of the SOA approach to local partnership working.

When you consider the draft SOA there are some questions which can help ensure that:
•   it reflects local knowledge
•   addresses local needs
•   helps the local partners work together

The rapid pace of SOA development, however, means that not everything can be done at once and some of the points which follow may have to be addressed after the SOA is agreed with the Scottish Government in May 2009, as part of its continuing improvement.

Key questions to consider

Is the SOA based on the best evidence?

The SOA will contain an Area Profile of the local social, economic and environmental pressures across the council area. The evidence will include:

• data analysis of the key challenges facing your council area
• performance information relating to the performance of the local public sector in meeting those challenges
• local political priorities and local opinion on such issues

Overall, the Area Profile should present a picture of your area that clearly establishes its key challenges and opportunities. This should form the basis and the rationale for the priorities and outcomes set out in the SOA. Therefore, you should expect that the Area Profile:

• explains past trends and how the Council and its partners have performed
• identifies future challenges and opportunities for the whole area and, where relevant, for local areas and neighbourhoods
• allows you to see both what needs to improve and where current progress should be maintained
• is informed by local political priorities, views of local people, of voluntary groups and of the business community
• enables you to identify the strategic priorities for your area

Does the SOA propose actual outcomes?

Outcomes are improvements in the quality of life and opportunities of citizens, communities and customers of public services. An outcome is the impact on the community of the activities of public organisations and other partners.

Outcomes are not simply descriptions of services' objectives. They are the results of what public bodies do, or what they enable communities and individuals to achieve for themselves. For example, outcomes can be expressed as:

Our children's life chances are maximised by improving their educational attainment and achievement

People across the council area will live longer, healthier lives

We will reduce the difference in life expectancy between the most affluent and most disadvantaged members of our community

Our economy will be strengthened through an improved range and quality of businesses and increased economic participation

Such outcomes will take time to deliver and may require several organisations to work together to achieve them. For example, if outcomes are set for improving health, reducing poverty or increasing safety this will, of necessity, involve several partners.

Elected Members have a key role in communicating their constituents' views and priorities, both within the Council and to its partners. When identifying outcomes for the SOA you should consider whether:

• the SOA is clear about what will change for local people
• the outcomes address the challenges and opportunities identified in the Area Profile
• the outcomes reflect the views of communities and service users views
• the outcomes will be easily understood and supported by local people and partners

Does the SOA have a clear strategic focus?

The SOA should focus on the things that matter most for the Council's area but it cannot contain everything that the Council and its partners do. So the SOA should identify the priorities for and of the community. Choices about priorities for the council area will need to be made. This means prioritising between potential outcomes, as well as prioritising within outcomes.

In prioritising between outcomes, Elected Members, working with council officers and partners and being informed by the Area Profile, will need to decide if some outcomes are overall more important to the future wellbeing of communities and of your area than others. Such decisions should be influenced by developing, over time, a better understanding of how different outcomes influence one another and how some outcomes may only be achieved if success in other outcomes is realised.

For example an SOA may seek improvements in outcomes relating to:
- the local economy
- the local community's health
- children and adults' educational success
- improved community infrastructure
- citizens that feel safer and more secure within the community.

You may wish to consider if all such outcomes are to be treated as equal priority or are some more important to your area than others? If there is no progress in one outcome area will this impact on success in other areas?

For example if there is no improvement in economic outcomes within the area will this negatively affect health outcomes, as significant bodies of research point towards the economic situation that people experience as having a major impact on their physical and mental health. As such, the council and its partners may choose to prioritise some outcomes over others in order to secure improvements in the longer term against a range of outcome areas.

Elected Members, again working with council officers and partners and being informed by the Area Profile, will need to consider their priorities within each outcome. For example, in considering issues such as economic outcomes, you might consider what the most important interventions for the council and its partners are.

For instance, should the focus be upon encouraging new business start-up within your area or offering better support to existing businesses such as improved employee training support? Or are you seeking a combination of both? If it is a balance, what should the balance be between the two types of intervention? Equally, should support to particular business sectors, such as tourism, be prioritised over, for example, physical infrastructure developments aimed at regenerating industrial areas?

The key point in prioritising interventions is to consider what combination of interventions is likely to result in the greatest impact for your area. This requires recognition that, if all interventions are seen to be of equal merit, the consequence may be that spreading resources too thinly across a range of areas will lessen the intended impacts.

In considering prioritisation, it will be important to base decisions upon a clear understanding of what the challenges and opportunities are for your area. This will, of course, involve a clear element of political judgement. However, decision-making will also be strengthened when:

- it draws upon the information set out in your Area Profile
- it is underpinned by a good understanding of the best research and evaluation evidence regarding which types of intervention work best in different situations

Having a clear strategic focus also means having a limited number of priorities and not simply a list of aspirations from which no real priorities emerge. As Elected Members, you should also be assured that each outcome is properly supported by a limited number of key performance indicators and, where required, improvement targets, that will allow the council and partners to track performance against the intended outcomes.

To give an example, if raising educational attainment is an outcome for your area, as Elected Members you may wish to consider the following:
- Is this outcome to be achieved in general terms across the council area?

or
- Will you choose to prioritise outcome improvements for some social groups who currently do less well than the general school age population?

It is more likely that you will have to consider how to balance the two, but key performance indicators should be put in place to track performance against your priorities. So, if for example, an improvement in educational attainment for particular social groups is considered to be a priority, indicators that track attainment by this group and that allow for comparison to attainment rates generally and by geographical area should be implemented and reported upon. Annex 1 includes a simplified worked example of how an outcome may be thought through.

When considering these choices you should ensure that:
- the outcomes reflect the strategic priorities as evidenced in the Area Profile
- it is clear what the Council and its partners are trying to achieve
- it is clear what the priorities between and within outcomes are
- the outcomes are both few in number and are meaningful
- the outcomes are supported by a limited number of meaningful indicators which will allow progress to be measured

Is the SOA capable of delivery?

Not everything that the Council and its partners do can be in the SOA, but that does not mean that those things are not important. The SOA is about <u>what you are going to achieve, not 'how' you are going to do it</u>.

The SOA should point people to where they can see how the outcomes are going to be delivered. There should be a clear line of sight connecting the agreed outcomes, set out in the SOA, and other key planning and delivery documents of the council and partner bodies which set out the actions that will deliver the outcomes. Therefore, it should be possible to make connections between outcomes, actions and results.

As an Elected Member you may want information on how those arrangements outwith the SOA will be developed to support its delivery and, in particular, that:

• the outcomes are supported by targets which balance ambition with realism about the time and resources needed for change to happen
• it will be clear how each of the partners will contribute to delivering the outcomes
• it will be clear how each service will contribute to delivering the SOA
• the outcomes and targets will influence priorities and resources in service plans
• the SOA will build on and show clear links to underpinning performance management and scrutiny arrangements

Will the SOA continue to improve?

The SOA Guidance for CPPs has a guiding principle that:
"both nationally and locally, we should be clear about the outcomes which our communities need and then review and align our arrangements to ensure that they are fit for purpose to support the delivery of those outcomes".

For Members, this means both that the Council and its partners should have ambition for the Council's area and that you should be clear about how the SOA can be improved after 2009. You should seek an understanding of how elected members will continue to be engaged in the ongoing development of the SOA and how reporting and scrutiny of the SOA will be organised. You should also seek clarity on the plans relating to how community engagement around the SOA will be organised.

A key issue for the Council will be whether your outcomes require changes in the ways that the Council manages its services or its work with partners. All public bodies are expected to support not just the Scottish Government's national outcomes but also the outcomes in the SOAs. However, being clear about the results which our communities want, and then 'working back' from them, may mean changing the ways we work, in order to better deliver those results.

For example, if progress is to be made in tackling the level of health inequality within communities, this may require:

• a fundamental rethink of how partner agencies work together and deliver services
• a rethink of how resources, whether people or facilities, are used
• new delivery structures that integrate services that were previously managed separately
• priority to be accorded to some interventions, such as better housing, against other possible interventions

Such actions may not be quick, or easy to implement. As a basis for this continuous improvement of the SOA, you may wish to know:

• whether there are gaps in information on local needs and how they will be filled
• what the arrangements are for strengthening community engagement in the SOA and how this will shape the SOA going forward
• how and when the progress on delivering the SOA will be reported, and
• what the role of Elected Members will be in reviewing the SOA and providing the leadership and knowledge with respect to its continued improvement

Key Messages

In summary, there are 5 key messages relating to the current development phase of SOA's. A SOA must:

- Be **Evidence-based** – it should show the local social, economic and environmental picture, with past and predicted trends, in an Area Profile
- Be about **Actual outcomes** – it should focus on improvements to be achieved in people's quality of life and opportunities, and on their social, economic and environmental conditions
- Have a **strategic focus** – it should identify the key priorities for the area, with a limited number of outcomes and meaningful performance indicators
- Be **capable of delivery** – it should point to the plans and performance arrangements which will ensure that the intended outcomes will happen
- Promote **continuous improvement** – it should identify the further work needed, including securing full ownership from all local partners and communities

Further Support and Contacts

Single Outcome Agreements will change many of the ways in which Councils and their partners manage their activities. You can find more information and key documents on SOAs by visiting the Improvement Service website at: www.improvementservice.org.uk/core-programmes/single-outcome-agreements-/

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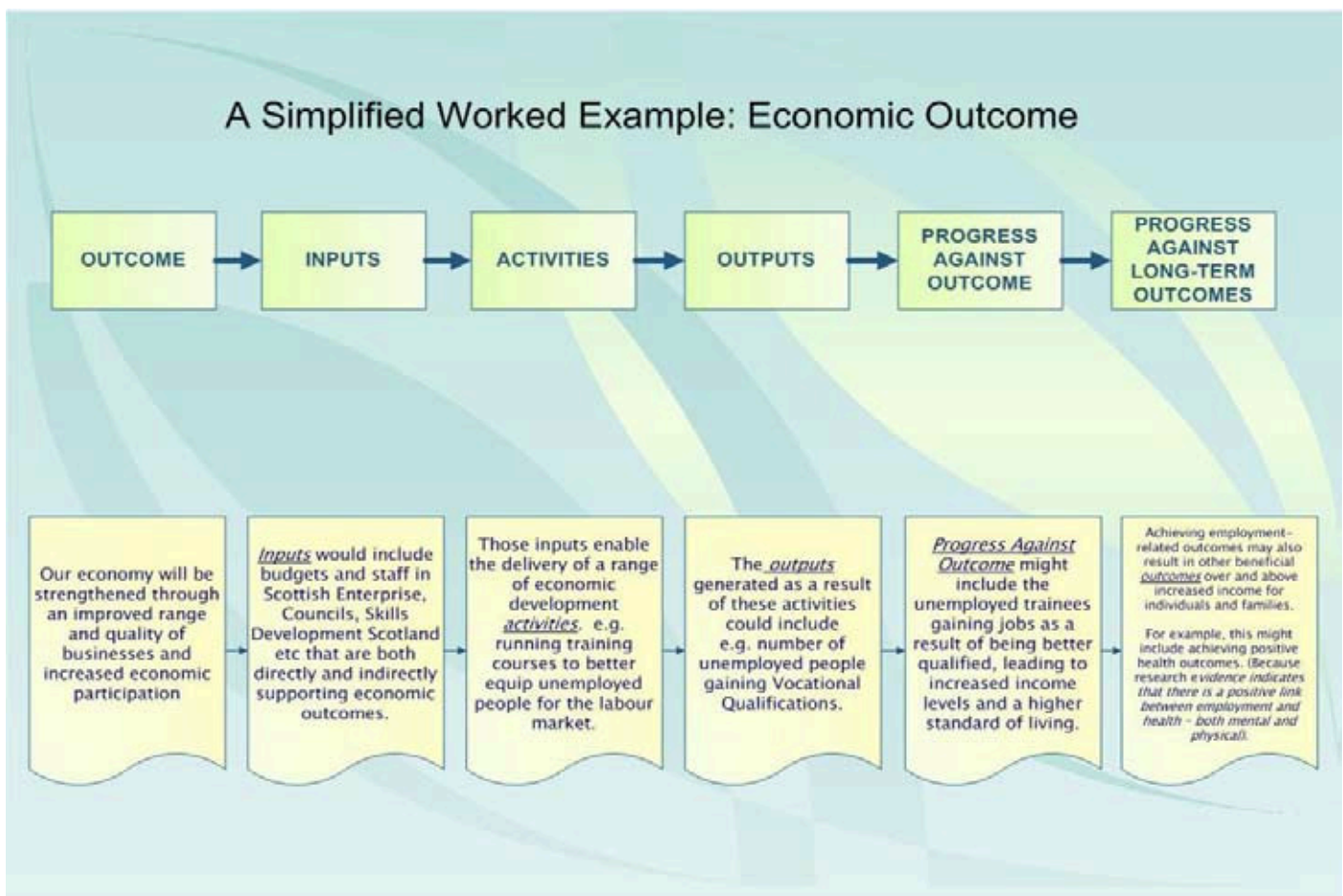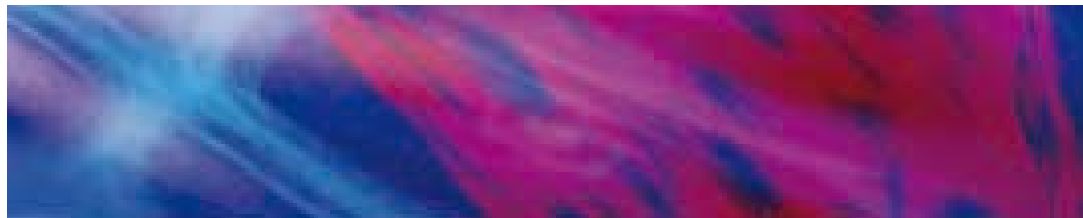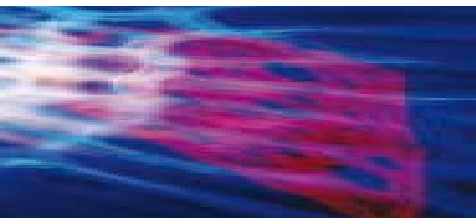
A Simplified Worked Example: Economic Outcome

The Improvement Service is devoted to improving the efficiency, quality and accountability of public services in Scotland through learning and sharing information and experiences.

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