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Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Outcomes Based Accountability: a critical perspective
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Introduction

A relatively new feature in the devolved administrations in the UK has been the emergence of outcomes based frameworks as key components in the policy process, influenced particularly by what is known as the OBA methodology as produced by American writer, Mark Friedman. Scotland led the way in using an outcomes based approach which has come to be associated with a Scottish approach to public sector reform (Cook, 2017). The main manifestation of the outcomes based approach in Scotland has been through what is known as the National Performance Framework (NPF). The core of the NPF was a dual matrix consisting of 16 national outcomes and 50 national indicators. The 16 outcomes are written as a vision of what the Scottish Government wishes to achieve covering a range of economic, social, health, environmental and justice issues. The 50 national indicators are more detailed expressions of desired improvements and are intended to track progress towards the national outcomes and purpose targets. The Welsh government also endorsed an outcomes based approach as a key element of improving public services and delivery. Legislation in 2015 required that national indicators be applied for the purpose of measuring progress towards the achievement of well being goals (Seaford, 2015). Five\six headline indicators are underpinned by 34-35 second tier whole-Wales indicators, plus a set of comparative indicators by sub population and areas of Wales.

While in Scotland and Wales outcomes approaches have been largely used to measure Government performance, in Northern Ireland a more ambitious strategy was adopted to base originally a Programme for Government Framework and subsequently a draft Programme for Government (PfG) on the OBA methodology. The draft PfG consisted of fourteen outcomes and forty four indicators which would measure progress on the outcomes. This draft document emphasised that the PfG was based on Friedman's Outcomes Based Accountability model and that the Government was committed to the use of this model. As with Scotland and Wales, the outcomes are broad. This paper examines the form of outcomes based approach used, the conceptual difficulties and issues of

validity with OBA as raised in the academic literature and the implications of using OBA for the policy process.

Concerns raised by the PfG Framework, Consultation and Draft PfG

A number of issues came to our attention which suggested the need for a close study of OBA. Firstly, while the Northern Ireland PfG Framework was heavily reliant on The Scottish National Performance Framework which had drawn on OBA, the Scottish and the Welsh Programmes for Government are not based at all on an OBA framework. Secondly, the consultation process in NI led to a major change in the framework. The original structure of: outcomes; improvement indicators and measures; was changed in a fundamental way, with the removal of the improvement indicators and the list of measures renamed as indicators. This indicated the dominant influence of OBA advocates. Thirdly, a study of Friedman's book raised initial issues of academic validity as it contains almost no academic references from the extensive literature on public administration. Fourthly, it was noticeable that although there were some critical responses, the majority of respondents to the consultation on the PfG framework, gave their support to an outcomes based approach and/or to OBA. However, it was also noticeable that such responses did not spell out what they understood the core principles of such an approach to be or showed awareness of the varieties of outcomes based approaches. A *Briefing on Northern Ireland Budgetary Outlook 2018-2020* published by the Department of Finance in December 2017 renews the commitment to OBA but does contain some changes from the draft PfG, including 12 rather than the 14 outcomes in the draft PfG. In NI questions can be raised about the promotion and use of OBA in the current political context and/or its use under Direct Rule. If OBA is not to be used by central policy departments, how likely is its continuing use by the voluntary sector and some HSC Trusts and Quangos or by local councils?

Key Outcome Based Methodologies

There is a wide range of outcomes based methodologies and it is useful to note some key models pertinent to discussion of OBA.

1. For what can be called a classical definition, reference can be made to Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011) where the approach is to begin with Needs:
Needs – objectives – inputs – activities – outputs – outcomes.
2. The Logic model is currently widely used. Here the starting point is Priorities: Priorities – inputs – outputs or services – outcomes (short term, medium and long term).
Recently the Logic model has become popular in Scotland. There are also a number of variations of this model, for example, the Wisconsin model, and locally developed in Scotland, the Weavers' Triangle.
3. Outcomes Frameworks in the NHS
The NHS Outcomes Framework, Public Health Outcomes Framework, and, Adult Social Care Outcomes Framework (ASCOF) are used in England and have been extended to Wales. They focus on information on what has been achieved. They define and set outcome domains and use a substantial number of indicators (40-60). Emphasis is on a bottom-up approach and user assessments.

4. Outcomes Based Accountability

Key features of the OBA approach include working backwards from a set of desired outcomes, the use of indicators (small numbers) and performance measurement - 'How much did we do?', 'How well did we do it?' and 'Is anyone better off?'

Key Conceptual Issues with OBA

Three key conceptual issues are addressed; the meaning of the term outcomes, the meaning of the term indicators and the relationship between indicators, performance and outcomes. In OBA outcomes is used in a very distinctive way in the sense of desired or imagined outcome, not in its normal meaning of actual outcomes or impact in a retrospective perspective. Thus outcomes are really normative statements and not empirical statements of impact. A further criticism is that OBA conflates into the term 'outcomes' a range of performance management terms, including objectives, goals, targets, benchmarks and outputs. It is still a widely held view, in the academic literature, that there is an important distinction between outputs and outcomes. There is also a criticism that many outcome statements, including those used in the PFG are very vague and general and often unmeasurable. As a consequence of the complexity in measuring these generally expressed outcomes, there has been a tendency for OBA to turn to proxy indicators with a focus on information that substitutes for the outcome with a set of data that is simple to collect, with only a few items of hard quantitative data used. An alternative view is that indicators are simply descriptors or detailed definitions of the expressed outcomes, with no significant difference in meaning. As with outcomes they are based on subjective evaluation.

Appeal and Feasibility of OBA

An attraction of OBA has been the apparent offer of a simple solution to complex problems. This appears to reduce the need for detailed policy analysis to a list of simple statistics or indicators. The methodology provides an easily understood framework to assess the performance of government bodies. The OBA methodology is also presented as a disciplined approach, applicable at all levels from local to national, and for evaluating all kinds of public projects - a uniform approach as opposed to the more ad-hoc approach of other methodologies. In the UK, the devolved administrations have tended to use the outcome based approaches on a long term projection of Government achievement. There is an obvious attraction for governments in being able to set more time for producing achievements, for postponing difficult decisions, and for avoiding political conflict over policy. In terms of the impact on policy making and formulation, the use of high level and vague outcomes can be seen as important in NI to facilitate agreement in the power sharing Executive which is divided on many issues. The need to reach a consensus may be better explained by regarding the outcomes for the PfG as a lowest common denominator approach, as the outcomes reflect expressions of policy generality that the parties can support (Gray and Birrell, 2012). It may be more difficult to find agreement on detailed policy and the nuts and bolts of delivery. The question is whether it is possible to have a PfG without policies, justification, funding details, delivery plans and legislative proposals?

The evidence that has been produced claiming the benefits of OBA has tended to relate to small-scale localised projects. OBA appears more feasible for use under a very limited range of conditions where attribution can follow a simple linear progression and what people experience is easily measured. This may explain achievements claimed for OBA in local council projects in Britain.

Issues relating to Outcomes and Indicators

The table below provides examples of the types of outcomes and indicators used in the draft PfG in NI. The relationship between indicators and outcomes is of key importance. The OBA methodology of working backwards from the desired outcomes has been seen as assuming a linear relationship, thus Bovaird (2014) sees such outcome approaches as invoking a narrow underspecified cause and effect chain model and Lowe and Wilson, (2015) as attributing outcomes to causes in a process of simplification. These criticisms argue that actual outcomes are a complex interplay of factors which can not be reduced to a short list of numbers and the processes involved are complex adaptive systems (Tannahill, 2016). To measure outcomes and trace contributions of a multiplicity of factors is a complicated resource-intensive exercise (Connolly, 2014). The OBA proposal for one outcome and a few indicators has been criticised as producing a narrow silo for analysis.

Examples of Outcomes and Indicators in NI Draft PfG

Outcome	Indicators
We have high quality public services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % of people who are satisfied with health and social care • % of schools found to be good or better • Usage of online channels to access public services
We have a more equal society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gap between highest and lowest quintile in healthy life expectancy at birth • Gap between % non FSME school leavers and % FSME school leavers achieving at level 2 or above, including English and Maths • % population living in absolute and relative poverty (before housing costs) • Employment rate of 16-64 year olds • Economic inactivity rate excl students • Employment rate by council area
We give our children and young people the best start in life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • % children at appropriate stage or development in their immediate pre school year • % schools found to be good or better • Gap between % non-FSME school leavers and % FSME school leavers achieving at level 2 or above, incl English and Maths

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• % care leavers aged 19 in education, training or employment |
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The wider literature on performance indicators has traditionally and effectively (Flynn, 2012) drawn attention to the dangers of distortion, on the three main grounds of; difficulty in reaching agreement on outcomes and indicators, the likelihood of data manipulation or stripping the context from data to produce the desired results, and the problem of attribution. Lowe and Wilson (2015) view measuring outcomes as a complicated business which can involve surveys and interviews, control groups and longitudinal follow-up, necessary to understand the impact of social policy interventions. Social policy interventions and their outcome can be seen as only understandable in the context of people's perceptions and evaluation of the impact on their lives. But, Bovaird (2014) has argued that lists of outcomes have been paraded as providing a rationale for government policies, without any convincing attempt to show how they relate to actual interventions.

The second part of the OBA framework relates to accountability and a distinction between population and performance accountability (Friedman, 2005). Population outcomes are outcomes for a whole population, whether for a country or region, and performance accountability relates to the performance of a service for those who receive the service. The validity of this distinction can be questioned and in more traditional outcome based models a distinction was often made between macro, meso and micro levels with the micro usually the individual or group. The performance of a service was described in terms of the impact on a sub set of the population with certain characteristics. Few social policy interventions are aimed at a whole population. A question also arises concerning the meaning of the word 'accountability' in this context and its different meaning from public or political accountability. The OBA methodology includes examination of performance measurement categories 'quantity' and 'quality' and asks, 'Is anyone better off?' but interpretations and calculation of this can vary and, in practice, government policies may not be intended to make people better off but have other objectives including, reducing expenditure, achieving fairness, or making people less dependent.

OBA has some distinctive characteristics, the most significant of which is 'working backwards' from the specified desired outcomes to the interventions which created them. This distinguishes OBA from alternative outcome approaches and suggests OBA is incompatible with them. Cook (2017) has acknowledged some benefits from a focus on intended outcomes in providing a focus for activity, collecting specific statistics providing information on how programmes are doing in encouraging long term thinking. However, the outcome of social policy interventions is more complex than collating a few statistics or always applying an off the shelf formula. While OBA originally had a major influence on the production of outcomes and indicators in Scotland and Wales it is no longer suggested in these jurisdictions that OBA is the only accepted methodology and other outcomes approaches are used. Northern Ireland is more enthusiastic in turning to rely totally on OBA as a basis for a PfG. The OBA methodology has not produced any robust evidence regarding the impact on policy making and despite the numbers of outcomes or indicators produced, they reveal little about the policy intervention that would be justified or required.

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