



Scotland Funders
Forum

es Evaluation
Support
Scotland

Harmonising Reporting Implementation

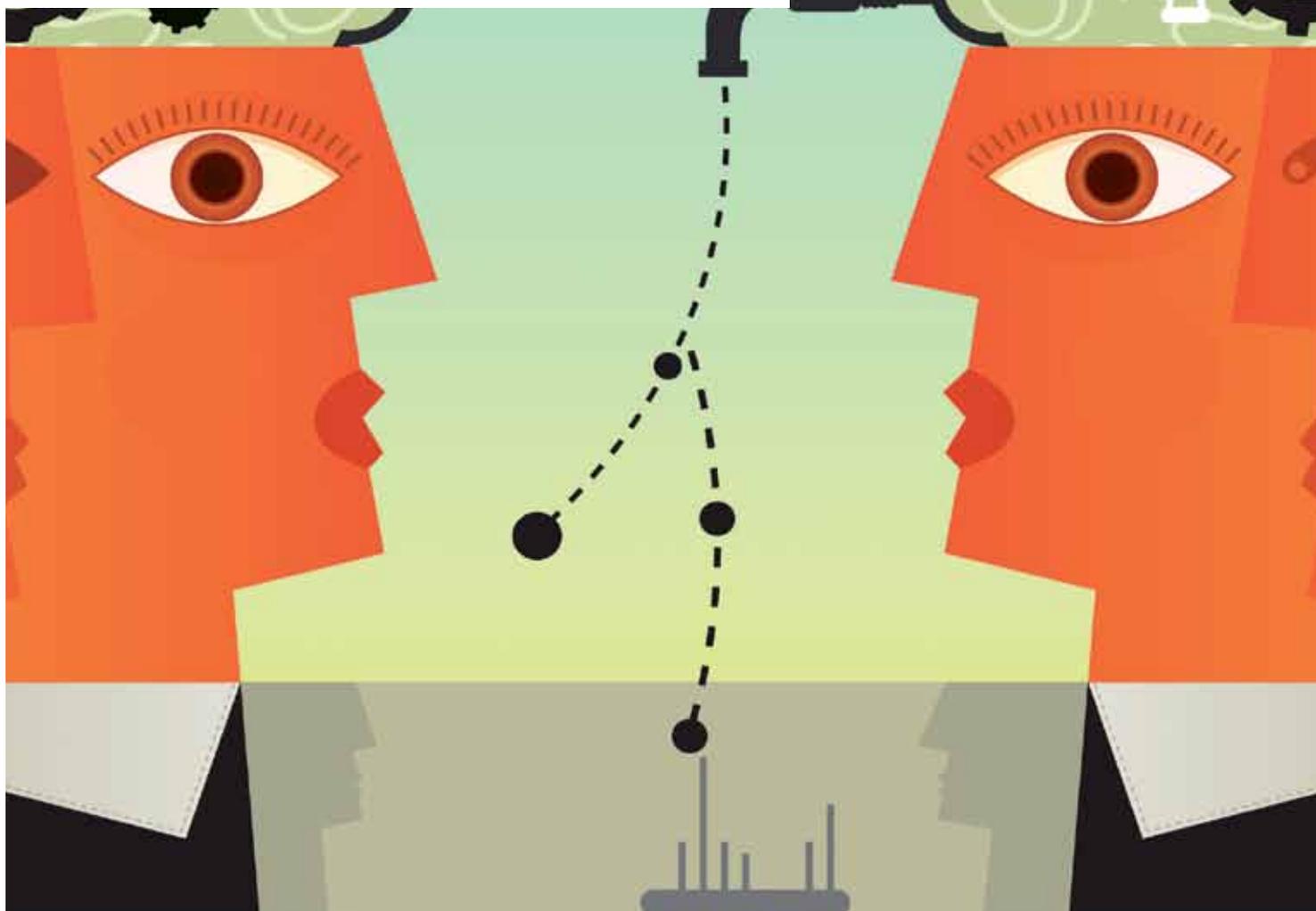
Case Study Report

MAY 2012



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1. Executive summary

Harmonising Reporting was published in 2010 by the Scotland Funders' Forum (SFF) with support from Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS). It contains practical guidance and templates to make reporting to funders less burdensome and more useful for funders and funded organisations.

It is too early to judge the overall success of **Harmonising Reporting** since changes to reporting guidance and practice will take time to implement. We wanted to find out if we are heading in the right direction. We wanted to showcase positive examples as an encouragement to all funders and funded organisations.

This report provides examples of how **Harmonising Reporting** has worked so far. The report uses four case studies to illustrate how funders have adopted good practice and the positive difference this has made. We also show shorter examples of positive improvements provided by other funders.

Funder and funded organisations agree that **Harmonising Reporting** is helping them make reporting more useful and less burdensome. They can point to improved communications, better guidance and greater clarity, all of which leads to a better reporting relationship all around.

There is a lot more to do – not least to raise the profile of **Harmonising Reporting** itself. At the end of this document we highlight areas where more work is needed to make reporting more useful and less burdensome.

This report was produced by the Scotland Funders' Forum and Evaluation Support Scotland.

The Scotland Funders' Forum is a gathering of funders in Scotland, including statutory bodies and independent grant making trusts, who are committed to best practice in funding the voluntary and community sectors and to maximising the impact of funding for the benefit of Scotland. We come together to share information, to identify and address areas of common interest and to share best practice and learning.

www.scotlandfundersforum.org.uk

Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS) works with voluntary organisations and funders so they can measure the impact of their work. We provide practical support and access to resources and tools. We take action to build evaluation and learning into funding and policy-making processes. ESS is a charity (SCO36529).

www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk

2. Harmonising Reporting: the story so far

Harmonising Reporting was written by funders in response to an agreed need to improve reporting. **Harmonising Reporting** does not suggest that one size fits all but it describes a common vision from funders about what they look for in reports. It sets out processes and systems that should be in place to make reporting effective.

However, reporting will only be more effective if funders – and funded organisations – act on the **Harmonising Reporting** good practice. So the Scotland Funders' Forum (SFF) commissioned Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS) to support implementation.

We set out to achieve the following:

- Funders' awareness of **Harmonising Reporting** is increased
- Funders implement at least one of the recommendations
- Funders see the benefits to them of taking action to improve reporting (or if they don't, they tell us and we do something more effective)
- Funded organisations see improvements in funders' reporting demands and in consistency between funders – which leads to less bureaucracy
- Reports to funders give better information for accountability and learning

Since **Harmonising Reporting** was published in summer 2010, the document has been disseminated and funders have received practical support to adopt the recommendations.

Initial baseline surveys in early 2011 gathered commitments to action from 20 SFF members and got feedback from 32 funded organisations about their experience of reporting to funders. Overall, this provided



positive evidence that many funders were following good practice in several areas of reporting. However, very few funders were following good practice all the time and in all areas. So, more action is needed.

Related Information

Harmonising Reporting - Where have we got to summary
www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/article.asp?id=266

3. Working together to showcase good practice: Case Studies

3.1 Scottish Huntington's Association and Scottish Government Reshaping Care and Mental Health Division

Ewen Cameron supports voluntary organisations funded through Section 10 of the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 as part of his wider mental health policy responsibilities at the Scottish Government (SG). Prior to **Harmonising Reporting**, Ewen felt "The grant reporting process was inconsistent and in danger of becoming a 'check box' exercise." **Harmonising Reporting** motivated him to develop a new performance and outcomes reporting template with guidance notes on completion. He provided 3 month notice of the changes and requested feedback from funded organisations.

Ewen says "I've already noticed improvement in communication, as well as more clarity about what information we expect. In most cases, reports are shorter, clearer and more focused on outcomes. They set out challenges and learning points - areas not covered

“ We can more confidently describe to Ministers how funded organisations are performing.”

previously by reports - which now provide us with a better early warning system

for potential problems. We can more confidently describe to Ministers how funded organisations are performing and use the reports to inform analysis of future grant bids.”

One of the funded organisations is Scottish Huntington's Association (SHA). This is a smaller organisation which produces good reports – showing size doesn't matter. John Eden, Chief Executive of SHA, said "I understand the pressures that everyone has

but reporting should not be burden. It is an integral part of what we do and the benefits for both the funder and voluntary organisation are huge." John believes "There is not really enough communication between both sides about what is being expected. If we invested more time to do that it would be good in terms of achieving outcomes."

John said "Before **Harmonising Reporting** our report to Ewen was quite onerous and data collection focused. In the most recent

“ It gave me the opportunity to reflect ... I perceive it as a valuable exercise.”

report there was a much more impact driven approach to reporting on what difference

you made and what you learned. It gave me the opportunity to reflect on a year's worth of work so I perceive it as a valuable exercise."

Reporting is not just about funders' guidance. John feels "This year's report was significantly easier to write because we have been investing in our data collection systems to provide information to funders more easily but also because the format was much easier to write."

Feedback is an important part of improving the reporting process so Ewen encouraged funded organisations to tell him how they are coping with the new process. Unfortunately, "To date no formal feedback has been received. This is perhaps not too disappointing given it is only the first year and organisations are still coming to terms with focusing reporting on outcomes. We will, however, continue to encourage feedback."

It takes two to tango and funders are not the only ones who find feedback useful. John thinks it helps improve relationships: "With the Scottish Government we already had a good relationship but we did not have detailed feedback and acknowledgement of the work that we had additionally done over and above what we said we would do. This year we were given this feedback and this felt good because the funder is happy to see that things that we were not necessarily contracted to do actually happen. I think there are real differences in the relationships with funders because of that."

John also pointed out a practical benefit of positive feedback: "One of the best feedback

that SG gave us this year was that the amount of information that was given in the report was just about right so that is helpful because this has been a different reporting format."

This case study shows that when it comes to reporting, organisation size should not be a



There are real differences in the relationships with funders because of feedback."

factor. However, communication and trust between funder and funded organisation is

essential. Like good dancing partners, funders and funded organisations have to glide along together and share the same passion to learn from each other. **So ... care to dance?**

3.2 The Junction and the Rank Foundation

When Sam Anderson, Manager at The Junction, responded to ESS's baseline survey on reporting to funders, she already was in a 'happy place' with their funder, the Rank Foundation (Rank). In fact, Sam suggested that she and Chris Dunning, Rank's Director of Youth Projects (Scotland), showcase their strong relationship and mutual commitment to improve the lives of marginalised young people.

In "Journeying Together", Rank says the nature and success of their youth work philosophy is based on the belief that it takes time to change people's lives. Rank sees their



If people do not tell me about problems I think that is suspicious."

investment as a relationship, rather than a transaction. Chris explains "We work with

the people we fund, building relationships based on trust and part of that is reporting. We want them to feel that they can share the difficulties. There are many that do not feel they can share these with their funders, in

fear that the funder might not think they are doing a good job and withdraw the funding. We are almost entirely the opposite. If people do not tell me about problems I think that is suspicious. There are always problems. That trust is key in trying to get reporting that is authentic, realistic, accurate and useful, not just for the

funders but for the writer and participant."

Sam confirms this approach:



Trustees have limited time so we want reports that are short and sharp."

"Rank are very keen on you reporting to them on whatever you think is useful to give them a picture of what you are doing. That is really empowering. I think more open conversations about the challenges make for a more mature relationship."

Rank also involves their trustees in the process so they can add value with their knowledge and experience. However, as Chris said, "Trustees have a limited amount of time to spend on each report, which is why we are constantly trying to get people to think about



providing something that is short and sharp and that has a number of questions in it rather than just give a list of what they have been doing.”

In terms of the monitoring and reporting support that Rank offers to their funded organisations, Chris said “We do a lot of facilitating to help them fix their problems

“**At the ‘Rank Rant’ we expect funded organisations to criticise Rank.**”

and issues and we have a network, *yarn*, to take those issues forward if they want to do it, locally, regionally or nationally.” For Chris the *yarn* network’s success is down to shared values and trust among those who use it. In addition, Chris said, “At the start of their programme our funded organisations attend our 24 hour business conference in England, where people have the opportunity to work in project groups and share peer learning, during the overnight stay. Then 6 months later we have a follow up event to see how things are progressing.” Rank also offers “an annual meeting where we bring everyone together. We have a specific session called ‘The Rank Rant’ where, if things are not going well, we can discuss them and make sure that we are aware why they are happening. Equally, we expect these organisations to be objectively critical of Rank.”

Chris says, “I’ve been working on **Harmonising Reporting** for the last 21 years.” When asked about reporting prior and post **Harmonising Reporting**, Sam acknowledged that “Rank were already ahead of the game so they did not have to change much. Rank has always been about ‘our relationship’ and they are top notch in that sense. I have been impressed with the time that they put into letting us know what is important for them to report on and what is worth investing time in.”

And Rank is not the only funder doing the right thing. Sam said, “One of our [other] funders recently gave us some headings to report on and asked us to do it in the way it’s most useful. They also provided guidance on what they want to hear so we don’t miss it. That was refreshing.”

“**The relationship with funders who understand Harmonising Reporting is stronger and it does not feel like it is us and them.**”

Sam says “The relationship we have with funders that understand **Harmonising**

Reporting is stronger than with those that do not, probably because there is a level of maturity and it does not feel like it is ‘us’ and ‘them.’”

It’s not all perfect. Sam says “Some funders are not particularly interested in the bigger picture” – namely the overall difference to young people. On the other hand, Chris says “getting the report at the time you want is still a challenge.” This suggests some funded organisations are not taking reporting – or their funder – seriously.

In summary then, what makes for a good relationship? Trust, communication and understanding; but most of all, that funder and funded organisations know that they are in ‘the journey’ together. **So then ... are you travelling together?**

Related Information

Rogers and Smith (2010) - *Journeying Together: Growing youth work and youth workers in local communities.*

Salter and Smith (Rank) - *Agency handbook 2011/12.*

3.3 Midlothian Voluntary Action, Scottish Government and Midlothian Council

Midlothian Voluntary Action (MVA) is funded by Midlothian Council through Former Fairer Scotland Fund (FSF) and Regeneration Revenue Grant, and the Scottish Government Third Sector Division (TSD) to support other third sector organisations, and to facilitate the effective representation of the sector in community planning. Lesley Kelly, Development Officer at MVA, shared her experience of reporting to both funders.

Lesley believes that in terms of monitoring and reporting the Council's Fairer Scotland Fund is "a model of good practice." Annette Lang, Senior Regeneration Officer at Midlothian Council, said that she wanted to follow good reporting practice "from the beginning." She thinks "Support to successful

“We use reports to make the case to Community Planning for the fund to continue.”

projects needs to start with their application so they can embed an

outcome approach and report on that." In Annette's case reports from funded organisations definitely do not sit on the shelf. Annette says she needs good quality information from funded organisations "to demonstrate the impact of their work as I have to keep arguing for their fund every year". She adds: "We ask funded organisations to tell us a good practice impact story as part of the reporting process; this could be about a day in the life of a person who benefited from the project. This always gets very positive feedback from elected members because it personalises the outcomes of the project on an individual."

When asked about the support the Council provides, Lesley said "They give you a nominated link officer from the Community Planning Partnership, who meets with you to discuss the content of your reports before

submission so he/she has a supportive role but also provides feedback, which is very useful." Annette explained "Link officers are nominated people who have expert knowledge of the work that the grant funds." She

“The link officer has a supportive role and also provides feedback, which is very useful.”

believes that the link officer system "gives projects a way of escalating their concerns if necessary", which helps maintain a good working relationship between all parties.

Scottish Government TSD adopted the good practice in **Harmonising Reporting** and worked with Voluntary Action Scotland (VAS) to produce a new reporting template. Lesley welcomed this change. "The VAS template very closely reflects the learning of **Harmonising Reporting** ... I liked the fact that as well as numbers you were also asked to report on impact and that there are questions about what went wrong and what did you learn from that. The reflective side of that was really good. I don't remember specifically being asked for that in monitoring templates

“I know in 6 months they will ask the same questions so I can prepare for that.”

before." Lesley said that MVA "didn't have the systems" to answer all the questions in the new reporting template as fully as they would like. However, "I know that in 6 months time they are going to ask us the same questions so I know that we need to prepare for it."

Lesley was pleased that feedback was invited on the reporting template: "I included my comments in relation to box size [being too small], as well as positive things. Credit where it's due!"

Now that funders are asking about the difference MVA makes, that is in turn encouraging MVA to collect better impact information. Lesley says “Until now we have been good at collecting numbers but not as good at collecting impact so we are intending now to run annual impact surveys.”

Harmonising Reporting also includes good practice for funded organisations which Lesley thought was helpful: “It is reasonable for **Harmonising Reporting** to set out recommendations for funded organisations as well as for funders because we have the money so we do have the responsibility to report on it.”

Lesley sounds a note of caution. She says **Harmonising Reporting** risks raising unrealistic expectations among funded organisations about the degree of synergy that will happen between funders. Funders are different and will always have different



requirements. Nevertheless this case study shows statutory funders can move towards a common focus on outcomes and learning.

3.4 Big Lottery Fund, The Robertson Trust and Circle

Circle is a Scottish charity that provides holistic, community based support to marginalised children and families. Circle is currently running the Families Affected by Imprisonment (FABI) project at HMP Addiewell, which The Robertson Trust (RT) has been funding for a number of years.

When, at the end of 2011, the Big Lottery Fund (BIG) also agreed to fund the FABI project, this presented an opportunity to ‘test’ the implementation of the **Harmonising Reporting** recommendations and what practical steps both funders could take to make the reporting on this project less burdensome for Circle.

Jackie Killeen, BIG’s Director for Scotland, said “We are committed to working with other funders to reduce the burden of reporting on

funded organisations.” Kenneth Ferguson, Director of RT, added that “The Robertson Trust has worked hard to include the recommendations of **Harmonising Reporting**



We are pleased to have the opportunity to develop a partnership with another funder.”

within our day to day work with charities.” Kenneth also said that “The Robertson Trust is

pleased to have the opportunity to take the recommendations of **Harmonising Reporting** further and develop a partnership approach with another funder like the Big Lottery Fund.”

Working in partnership often presents challenges. Here the key challenge was to agree a joint approach to reporting and learning.

Once both funders agreed that they are funding similar outcomes, the next challenge was to explore and align outcomes for Circle to report on. During this process, BIG also focused on developing their new relationship with Circle and supported them in setting

“ This reduces our reporting workload considerably, freeing up valuable time to support families.”

up their grant and becoming familiar with their monitoring and reporting requirements.

The funder therefore continued to demonstrate its commitment to implementing **Harmonising Reporting** to improve relationships in reporting and communication, which the report highlighted as being of great importance.

BIG and RT looked at the outcomes that they are each currently funding and identified three outcomes each. They then explored common areas, themes and indicators/targets, agreeing that the main focus of the project and their investment was around ‘resilience and coping’. This led them to agree on one outcome that could capture this and be shared by both funders. To ensure that this outcome fully reflects the main components of each of the two separate funds, the unique outcome is supported by a basket of shared indicators/targets.

Interestingly, the revised framing of the project resulted in a very strong synergy with Circle’s generic outcome approach. Maura Day, Operational Manager at Circle, said that “Circle is delighted that the Big Lottery Fund and The Robertson Trust, both of whom fund our work supporting fathers from HMP Addiewell, have agreed that we evaluate and report against the same outcome and indicators. This reduces our reporting workload considerably, freeing up valuable time for supporting families. We welcome this move towards harmonised reporting and hope that other organisations will emulate this practice.”

In addition to agreeing on a single outcome, funders also harmonised the reporting

schedule, which is now aligned to Circle’s financial year, and a single progress report based on BIG standard report. The external evaluation that RT is funding of the FABI project will also continue, alongside Circle’s own internal reporting, and will be shared by all organisations.

Both funders will continue to enjoy a distinct relationship with Circle. They also agreed to take a joint approach to future learning and BIG will also join the existing Advisory Group.

In summary, Liz Dahl, Chief Executive of Circle, said “This is such a huge help to a small organisation like Circle that two major funders have come together and agreed to this on our behalf, thank you Big Lottery and The Robertson Trust. For Circle this funders collaboration means that we will have more

“ We will learn from this experience to see how we might apply it in other cases.”

time to do work on the ground and use less of our time in duplicating reporting.

Everyone wins.” Liz’s view is shared by Jackie, who said “I am pleased that we have been able to take a **Harmonising Reporting** approach with the Circle project, and we will learn from this experience to see how we might apply it in other cases.”

Setting up a partnership is not always straightforward, especially when it comes to compromising on reporting and monitoring arrangements. However, this case study demonstrates that ‘difficult’ does not mean ‘impossible’ and that if two funders can manage to work together so could others. Key learning to share then is that it is possible to harmonise reporting and for different funders to work together. However, for this to successfully work, funders should engage actively and support projects, as well as be willing to be flexible and to approach the concept of **Harmonising Reporting** positively, using it to focus on common outcomes.

Annex provides full methodology on the development of the four case studies.

4. Successes and challenges so far

Now that we have a clearer picture of the efforts that funders and funded organisations have made to improve reporting since the publication of *Harmonising Reporting*, we can reflect on the successes and identify further work that is needed. This last section of our report pulls out 4 common themes and highlights improvement areas.

4.1 Relationships matter

Case study funders and funded organisations agreed that some aspects of their relationship had improved notably. They felt that there was a higher level of communication between them, which led to a better understanding of what each expected in reporting on funded work. Funded organisations said that, because of the improvement in relationships, they felt more confident to bring up issues with funders and to discuss how they could tackle them together.

What needs to improve:

The good news is that funders and funded organisations agree about the benefits of good relationships and the steps to be taken by both sides to ensure clear understanding. However, they also agree that more needs to be done to improve relationships.

Funded organisations said...

“What I think is missing is having better relationships with grant officers and more inside information about what funders are looking for.”

(Lesley Kelly, MVA)

“When funders have the resources, I think face-to-face meetings with the grant officer would be really useful.”

(John Eden, SHA)

Funders said...

“We need to build better relationships and engage in more regular dialogue with funded organisations (and) funded organisations need to maintain their relationships with funders.”

(Ewen Cameron, SG)

“Funders need to sit around the table more equitably with the recipients and really participate in the world that they face.”

(Chris Dunning, Rank)

4.2 Feedback – it's good to talk

Funders and funded organisations also agree about the importance of feedback. Feedback by funders on reports leads to better reports. Feedback by funded organisations on funders' guidance leads to better guidance. The case studies in this report illustrate positive examples – and the benefits – of mutual feedback.

What needs to improve:

But not every funder gives feedback: "We don't even get acknowledgement of the receipt of the forms. You only hear from

funders if there's a problem."
(Lesley Kelly, MVA)

"Sadly, we don't get much feedback from funders. Some send a standard letter from the grant officer saying that 'we've met all the reporting requirements' but that's all. After investing a massive amount of time and energy on a project for three years, this is an anticlimax."

(John Eden, SHA)

4.3 Keeping it clear and simple

Funders and funded organisations agreed that **Harmonising Reporting** has helped them improve the quality of reports. Funders have provided clearer guidance on what they want and funded organisations have got better at collecting and presenting the right information. Both sides found **Harmonising Reporting** useful in helping them understand what a good report should look like. Funders reported that after implementing some of the recommendations in **Harmonising Reporting** they get the information they need with less effort.

There are positive examples from funders not featured in this document:

"We now provide funded organisations step by step guidance notes; a worked example and pre-populate the boxes as much as possible, using the information from the application form. This has resulted in better quality monitoring forms and there is less need for officers to contact the grantee for clarification." **(Angus Council)**

The Self Management Fund (run by Long Term Conditions Alliance Scotland) and **The Climate Change Fund** (run by Keep Scotland Beautiful) both used principles and templates from **Harmonising Reporting** for their own reporting requirements. This, along with training for grantees, enabled them to produce thematic reports showcasing learning from the respective Funds.

Some funders and funded organisations are agreeing reporting requirements at the start of the process, this ensuring everyone knows what will be reported on, how and when. For example, **The Junction** successfully engaged in open negotiations with two of its funders, **Partnership Drugs Initiative** (part of Lloyds TSB Foundation) and **Edinburgh Alcohol & Drug Partnership**, at the start of the project to decide on reporting requirements and identify outcomes. The Junction reported that funders had been perceived as responsive and very supportive throughout this process.

What needs to improve:

However, there is still frustration on both sides. Funded organisations are frustrated by the amount and frequency of information requested by some funders or the lack of interest in learning:

“Nearly every funder wants a midyear report, some of them want them quarterly and some want an end of year report. We feel like we are reporting continuously.”

(Lesley Kelly, MVA)

“Some funders are not particularly interested in the bigger picture. They just want to know about the bit of work that they fund.”

(Sam Anderson, The Junction)

“We provide a service in Lothian for which we receive funding from and report to four different councils but they have their own individual reporting requirements, which are not harmonised in any shape or form and there’s not much guidance given about the information that they are looking for.”

(John Eden, SHA)

For their part, funders are frustrated by late reports or reports that do not focus on outcomes:

“Funded organisations underestimate the time it will take them to fill in the report. Sometimes we don’t get the monitoring reports on time so we have to chase them.”

(Annette Lang, Midlothian Council)

“Reporting is not about how much you write but what you write and for whom and what value that has. We don’t want a list of what they have been doing.”

(Chris Dunning, Rank)

“Funded organisations need to seek support and training to develop a better understanding of the outcomes and evaluations agenda but particularly in respect of focusing reporting against outcomes, rather than activities or targets.”

(Ewen Cameron, SG)

4.4 One project but lots of reports?

Some of the funders who participated in this study were reducing the burden of reporting and funded organisations shared their gratefulness for that. Some funded organisations were impressed with the willingness of funders, when co-funding projects to agree single reporting requirements among funders; or when they said they were happy to accept reports provided to other funders with additional information included in a cover letter.

What needs to improve:

Joining up between funders is still the exception rather than the rule:

“There’s important work done by individual funders but not collectively.”

(Sam Anderson, The Junction)

“At present we do not have a joined up process for applications and monitoring across the Council. As the Council is keen to continuously improve we are currently considering a single application and monitoring form system with the same questions.”

(Annette Lang, Midlothian Council)

“I wonder if two or three funders could do something together ‘by example’ in smaller areas and actually prove it on the ground so we actually get change.”

(Chris Dunning, Rank)

5. So what's next?

From the stories that funders and funded organisations have shared with us over the course of this report it is clear that **Harmonising Reporting** has played a key role in improving not only reporting itself but also the existing relationships between funders and funded organisations. This means that all the efforts made so far have paid off and that we must celebrate!

However, there is still further work that needs to be done:

- **Continue to disseminate Harmonising Reporting further:** ESS has already identified few gap areas which could benefit from **Harmonising Reporting**, including health boards and scrutiny bodies, which although independent receive their funds from government.
- **Funders** should continue to work on their monitoring and reporting requirements to reduce burden on funded organisations. When doing so, funders might want to consider getting the views of those they fund, improving their communication and consequently, their relationship.
- **Funded organisations** should continue to share views and concerns with funders by providing constructive feedback, in which they acknowledge both what works and what doesn't. This should lead to more trusting relationships all around.
- Finally, **ESS** will revisit the implementation of **Harmonising Reporting** at a later date to gather further evidence of the success of **Harmonising Reporting**.

Annex: Methodology

Over the course of October and November 2011 a range of funders and funded organisations were interviewed by Patty Lozano-Casal at ESS, reflecting on the learning from the implementation of **Harmonising Reporting** and its recommendations.





Clearer expectations

Increased reporting on outcomes

More confidence to bring up issues

Improved data collection systems

More reporting on challenges and failures

Improved relationships

More and clearer guidance

So far Harmonising Reporting has led to...

Less effort to get information

Increased feedback

More interest in the bigger picture

More communication

