Report on the Consultation Meetings:

'Designing a Programme to Support Nonprofits Identifying, Understanding and Reporting on their Effectiveness and Results'
Garth Nowland-Foreman, Community Solutions (06 November 2013)

In August 2013 Community Research commissioned an internal background paper and 'think piece' from Community Solutions.

The resulting document, 'Designing a Programme to Support Nonprofits Identifying, Understanding and Reporting on their Effectiveness and Results' is available from Community Research offices and looks at

- Unpacking Effectiveness, Results and Outcomes for non-profits,
- How long-term change and learning really takes place for non-profits and their leaders, and
- How we might put this together to develop a practical programme of support for non-profits on Effectiveness, Results and Outcomes.

In September, Community Research and Community Solutions consulted (in focus groups and one-to-one interviews, face-to-face and by Skype) with a number of informants to test the ideas being developed, and help identify the most useful focus for Community Research's future work in this area. A list of persons consulted and their affiliations is at Attachment A below.

The main themes emerging from these conversations can be summarised as:

- Overall, there was strong support for this as an important issue both for the sector and for public policy. It was recognised that a major force currently driving the issue was renewed interest by government in 'evidence-based' approaches and 'investing in outcomes'. However there is also a longer term and wider trend to be more focused on achieving results, which has a deep resonance with aspirations of many in the sector to really make a difference.
- There was also strong agreement that the greatest long term value is likely to lay in promoting and developing an on-going learning and improvement culture, and that much of this is learnt and reinforced in a relational way, especially with peers (as the power dynamics, including those associated with experts and funders, can undermine opportunities for genuine reflection and learning).
- A number emphasised the enormous diversity in the sector, and the requirement to be relevant and responsive to local needs. What is needed is not an academic approach, but something very practical and immediately useful to 'cash-strapped and time-poor' organisations. One-size fits all will not work, and investment in monitoring and evaluation will always need to be proportional in terms of time, effort, and complexity.

- At the same time there was a concern not to be limited to an uncritical 'technical assistance' approach, but to help people understand and debate what the assumptions are behind different approaches, the risks as well as the opportunities.
- There was both interest and scepticism about measurement, and a strong interest in seeing qualitative indicators alongside quantitative measures. A number identified the need for easy access to a range of tools.
- Where to start, easy entry points and how to get an overview of the field was consistently identified as an unmet need. While there are plenty of tools available, and numerous websites offering resources, it was difficult for the uninitiated to know where to start (and when to stop). People need enough knowledge and the confidence to make their own choices about tools and approaches, based on their own situation.
- In different ways a number of people made the point about needing to build on what people already know, but also to enable the learning to be challenging - space for 'courageous conversations'.
- Several people questioned whether all funders currently have the capacity to understand the subtleties of these issues, and to tolerate the needed diversity and organisation-driven approaches. Will it depend on a qualitative change in relationships between funders and non-profits, and how realistic is this?
- Many identified that monitoring and evaluation always requires investment of an organisation's time and other resources, and must be proportional to the expected benefit. Excessive formalisation of the process can not only be costly but also undermine real learning.
- A number suggested that it was best to start where organisations are already motivated and interested in learning more and/or putting into practice their current ideas.
- A number identified that one-off events can be motivating, but this soon fades when participants return to their organisations if there isn't on-going support, organisational buy-in, and available resources.
- Several people emphasised the importance of Community Research not 'biting off more than it could chew', but ensuring it identified a manageable place to start and doing a few things well.

Other issues raised by individuals included: the ongoing importance of kaupapa Maori frameworks; the need for accessible local/regional supports; the option to involve MSD Capability Mentors; various overseas models of digital learning communities applicable to NZ; the need for clear and consistent definitions and a common language; the need to include a 'value for money' perspective as well as outcomes; the importance of considering collective impact, not just that of one organisation alone; the risk of rigidly locking into assessing against pre-determined outcomes, when unanticipated results and changes can be more significant (the more specific outcomes and processes are built into contracts, the less room there is to be a learning organisation); start with some simple, low cost activities that can generate quick feedback and learnings; explore opportunities to support each other, for example in peer reviews; and the importance of making sure data collected is actually used and fed back.

Overall there was considerable endorsement for the paper's analysis of the issue, and for Community Research's role in contributing to this issue.

Falling out of the responses to this paper, the areas for Community Research **possible future involvement** include:

1

- Development of a curated 'portal' or entry point for organisations to obtain an overview of the issues involved in monitoring and evaluating outcomes, including traps to look out for, the range of tools available and how to make choices, with links to 'indicator banks', taxonomies and 'what works' resources, etc. ("What Works Window").
- A simple web-based register of what organisations are using what monitoring and evaluation tools, along with contact details, to facilitate organisation-to-organisation learning ("The Tools We Use Register")
- A programme to increase awareness of these resources, and upskill 'key informants' as part of this, eg through Govt & Semi-State agencies, peak agencies, roadshows and seminars, through MSD Capability, Mentors, Unitec NFP Course

2

- A programme of supports with a particular focus on peer-learning, and fostering 'an ongoing learning and improvement culture', ref Pages 7 and 10 of the 'thinkpiece'
- Initially roll this out in a small-scale way with two or three pilot programmes. These might be structured geographically/iwi/locally, peak agencies/communities of practice, or through digital communities
- Development of a 'continuum of supports', to include possibilities such as: one-on-one consultancy/mentoring, group 'clinics' on broad topics or issues (where the agenda is primarily participant-driven), semi-structured problem-solving workshops, and more trainer-directed training on specific skills or topics (to include webinars and seminars).

3

- Advocacy with wider partners, including funders, to promote the ways that they can support 'an ongoing learning and improvement culture'

4

- Investigation of knowledge dissemination routes, in to facilitate a better understanding of 'what works' within the sector, through Government, and among capacity builders and others supporting the sector.

Attachment A:

A list of respondents

- Anne Duncan, Director – Superu
- Brent Watson, Senior Project Advisor, ISO - MSD
- Craig Forbes, Project Manager - MSD Family and Community Services
- Dave Henderson, Co-ordinator – ANGOA
- Denise Bijoux – Inspiring Communities
- John Prendergast, CEO - Community Trust of Southland
- Mary-Jane Rivers – Delta Networks
- Megan Courtenay – Inspiring Communities
- Paula Strickson, Family and Community Services - MSD
- Phillipa Gaines – Independent Researcher
- Sarah Doherty, Acting Deputy Director - Charities Services
- Simon Cayley, CEO – Bishops Action Foundation
- Tess Casey, CEO – VASS (NZ Fed of Vocational and Support Services)
- Stephen Blyth, Fundraising and Comms Manager – Community Research
- Tania Thomas, Director, Centre for Family and Whanau Knowledge – Families Commission
- Tina Reid, Executive Director – Social Development Partners