Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures Mid-Term Review

BOBF Advisory Council Perspective

Introduction

Members of the Advisory Council have met to reflect on, and consider the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures to date, as a contribution to the current Mid-term Review. The Advisory Council members welcome the Review and are committed to engaging with it as effectively as possible, both individually and collectively.

The Advisory Council remains supportive of both the intent, and content, of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures and identifies significant positives both in its implementation to date and in the role that the Council has played. Where the Council is critical of the implementation it is where it has fallen short of targets and expectations, and/or where it is perceived that the necessary commitment has been lacking.

In reviewing and discussing the implementation of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, the Council followed the headings and questions provided by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in its briefing note and, accordingly, this response follows a broadly similar structure.

Awareness

This section sought a perspective on levels of awareness of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures among specific audiences. The members added the political arena to those specified. The Council also included Q2 under the second heading (Visibility) in column 6, and presented its responses as marks out of a maximum of 10, with accompanying comments in some instances, in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Know it exists</th>
<th>Understand the general overview</th>
<th>Know the outcomes</th>
<th>Know who to contact if they have questions</th>
<th>See progress under BOBF as source or signal of progress? (Visibility)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Statutory</strong></td>
<td>5 Some know, some don’t; some know but don’t care</td>
<td>4.5 (4 to 5) It hasn’t broken through the cultural barrier</td>
<td>3 Have general knowledge but wouldn’t know it instinctively</td>
<td>6 Would generally know within the system</td>
<td>3 Not sure that anyone reads the Annual Report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-statutory</strong></td>
<td>6 Higher than statutory but not high enough</td>
<td>6.5 Some orgs v. politicised – mostly professional staff</td>
<td>4 Voluntary members may not have the interest or capacity to fully engage with BOBF</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Political

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Public</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Does it matter if the public doesn’t know it exists?

Other comments:

- There are problems with the name since it is difficult to communicate, and these are exacerbated by the almost universal (within the sector) use of the BOB-F acronym – which is meaningless to other audiences. In contrast, strategies such as ‘Vision for Change’ and ‘Re- Building Ireland’ are better known and comprehended
- The Annual Report could have more bite – for example, it should include the record of attendance at Children and Young People’s Policy Consortium meetings
- There is scope to reconsider and strengthen the role of the Consortium and of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs;
- There is still a need to be more strategic and specific, for example, to identify the (e.g.) five things that will produce 80% of what will improve children’s lives
- Public sector implementation awards, to recognise serious intent in implementation, might be considered
- Where funds are sought, the applicant organisation should have to specify how this will serve the implementation of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures
- It would be helpful to get communications advice – while it may be too late to re-brand Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, this should be considered in the context of the next strategy for children and young people. It would be better if it were titled e.g. “The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People” or “Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures for Children and Young People.”
- The diagrams in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures are very static, for example, there is no connection depicted between the outcomes

Visibility

1. Is Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures seen as an important policy for children and young people?

At its outset, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures was lauded as seminal and ground-breaking but despite the high-level launch by the Taoiseach, Tánaiste, and Minister for Children and Youth Affairs it is not seen as important as evidenced by the fact that it is not generally well enough known and there has been a lack of commitment in its implementation. It does not seem to feature as a priority within the overall government system. One example was the Budget decision to raise child benefit universally by €5, which is at odds with the commitment on child poverty. By contrast, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures is perceived as important by the non-statutory sector.
Some aspects of children and youth policy, e.g. the preschool curriculum, may be viewed as important but not Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures in its entirety. The potential of the Framework, particularly the whole-of-Government approach, has not been realised.

The Council noted that the Departments of the Taoiseach and Tánaiste are not represented in the Sponsors Group and that it is left to the smallest Department to coordinate the whole government system. It was considered that there is a need to get the attention of the Taoiseach to breathe new life into the Framework¹.

2. **Do you think that Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures is referred to and referenced frequently by members of the children and young people sector?**

There is a need to differentiate between the statutory and non-statutory children and young people’s sectors. For the most part, both reference Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures frequently – the non-statutory more so, but still not sufficiently.

3. **How could the Department of Children and Youth Affairs improve the awareness and visibility of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures?**

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs cannot implement Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures on its own but it can promote and encourage its implementation, and seek increased commitment. It would be helpful if the Minister were to issue a ‘Mid-Term Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures statement’ identifying progress as well as the gap between commitments and delivery, and what is now needed in terms of action.

There is a need for a communications and marketing plan with clarity on audiences and segmented approaches to each.

There is also a need for national discourse to determine our aspirations for children and young people, and how we are going to achieve them – fundamentally, there is a need to build support around challenging inequality, and considering this as a justice issue.

Government leadership is considered important, as is evidenced, for example, by the impact of the quota for the employment of people with disabilities across the government system.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs should continue to build strategic relationships and to advocate for the maintenance of commitment to the implementation of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, to maintain on-going dialogue with other stakeholders. In this context, it is important to identify what the ‘wins’ are for other stakeholders – ideally, that they would choose to engage because of the benefits, rather than as a result of a direction. However, it is recognised that even within the Department of Children and Youth Affairs it can be difficult to bring colleagues working on different strategies together.

¹ It was also suggested that there is a “need to bring Fianna Fáil closer to the implementation of BOBF”
Implementation:

1. Do you think the process of implementation has been successful?

- In general, as evidenced by its impact on children and young people, the Council view is that the implementation has not been successful (see next section). However, objectively, this needs to be nuanced, since there have been several successes including:
  - The fact that the Consortium exists – it is very valuable and important but there is a need for more consistent membership and attendance, to be more effective;
  - The Sponsors Group meets and has robust discussions – for example, the first-time various Government Departments have come together on child poverty
  - Children and young people’s participation, including the strategy, implementation of commitments, establishment of the hub, etc.
  - Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures provided a mechanism for the Community and Voluntary sector to engage with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, and there is a developing engagement with the Department of Education and Skills;
  - The Advisory Council lobbied within Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures for greater investment in the school meals service and this was taken up by Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
  - The development of the Children and Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSCs)
  - The publication of An Indicator’s Set for Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures
  - It is also acknowledged that there is significant on-going consultation and collaboration that is not always evident or visible

2. What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures since 2014?

Positives have been indicated in the section above. There is a need to balance recognition of progress made with the reality that there is so much more to be achieved.

In general, the Advisory Council is disappointed that certain barriers to effective whole-of Government implementation have not been adequately recognised or addressed, for example, some Departments have been slower to meaningfully engage in the implementation and with the Council. The Council believes that it is vital that these are tackled before the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures successor strategy is developed.

In terms of specific weaknesses:

- Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures was intended as a high level, strategic, policy framework. Instead it contains too many commitments, not all of which carry the same weight in terms of their impact on children and young people’s lives, and there is a need for sharper focus and prioritisation
- The Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures implementation plan did not get sufficient engagement from other Departments
• Actions agreed at the Consortium meetings can be weak and, although the Department of Children and Youth Affairs does follow-up on them, there are no consequences for failure to deliver.
• Some important departments and agencies have a poor record of attendance at Consortium meetings which is very telling. Perhaps if the Minister was always in attendance this might improve.
• Having the Taoiseach attend a Consortium meeting would be an important strategic move and may engender a stronger whole-of-Government approach, particularly in relation to child poverty.
• There are no commitments in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures on human rights and equality and the Department of Justice and Equality, as the relevant Department, is not a member of the Sponsors Group. This is a significant omission when it comes to policy on children and young people.

Implementation Structures:

1. Do you think the implementation structures are working well?

There is some evidence that the working of the structures is improving, but this is not universal with respect to some stakeholders.

2. Do you think the implementation structures feed into each other?

The structures are useful and there is coherence in the design of the processes for linking the Implementation team, Council, Sponsors Group, CYPSCCs, Consortium, Senior Officials Group, Cabinet sub-committee.

3. Do you think there could be improvements on the implementation structures? I.e. Communication between the different structures etc.

The Advisory Council could be more effective in its preparation for Consortium meetings, reporting back, and in using the other structures e.g. in monitoring subsequent actions by the Sponsors Group.

It is suggested that the minutes of Advisory Council meetings could be shared with the other elements of the implementation structure and, perhaps, theirs with the Council.

Arts and culture are not represented at the Consortium; there should be representation from the Arts Council/Creative Ireland;

The Department of Justice and Equality should be a member of Sponsors Group.

4. Do you think there is sufficient communication between DCYA and the implementation structures/Advisory Council?

There is good on-going communication between the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Advisory Council; the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is always communicating with the other elements of the structures.
5. How do you feel the Advisory Council has contributed to the implementation structures of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*?

The Council believes that it has played a positive role in contributing to the implementation of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* to date, but recognises that it has room for improvement and has re-stated its commitment to being more effective over the coming three years.

It would be helpful in terms of the Council’s contribution to Consortium meetings if some key items for its agenda could be identified on an annual basis, as this would facilitate prior consideration and preparation.

The Council would benefit from having more, and better, engagement with the Sponsors Group, as this is more implementation-focused than the Consortium can be.

The Council could be more pro-active in raising awareness within the non-statutory sector.

**Engagement:**

1. Do you think there is enough engagement between the Advisory Council and the statutory sector?

There was extensive engagement on the child poverty issue; this suggests it is easier to get this engagement when there is a specific issue in focus, together with a reciprocal interest in collaborating.

The Council could be more active in submitting its considered views on a range of issues to the Minister and, perhaps, more widely.

The Council has experienced significant openness towards it from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

The Council has also experienced that the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has taken its commitments under *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* more seriously than other Departments and agencies, and this reflects a developed relationship that has produced mutual benefits.

2. How could the above engagement be improved?

One suggestion is that, when a representative of a department or agency is meeting with, or making a presentation to, the Advisory Council a representative from other Departments and agencies could be invited in the interests of having more comprehensive and engaged discussions.

3. What is the quality of engagement between the statutory sector, non-statutory sector, stakeholders and agencies?

The Council’s experience to date is that most statutory agencies and Government Departments are respectful but not yet ready to openly share what they are struggling with.
4. What is the effectiveness of engagement?

The Council believes there is a need to further clarify its role, particularly in the context of making statement, how do we compare, for example, with the Fiscal Advisory Council which makes public comment on the Government’s economic policies and decisions? This has been highlighted by major decisions in the recent Budget 2018 – is it appropriate for the Council to take a public position on that in terms of its impact on children and young people?

5. What is the frequency of engagement?

Apart from formal meetings, engagement with representatives of statutory agencies and departments has varied with particularly good engagement with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. There has also been recent openness and engagement with the Department of Education and Skills. No Department or agency has declined to meet the Council. There is a sense that this has not yet been fully tested by the Council.

Review of outcomes achieved to date:

1. What are the outcomes achieved to date i.e. Policy, progress, collaboration?

The specific focus on child poverty has produced several beneficial outcomes e.g.

- The changes made by the Taoiseach, in relation to the Back to School Allowance, on his last day in office as Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection indicated his awareness of, and interest in, the significance of child poverty, and reflected the Council’s contribution in this area
- Improvements in the Direct Provision child payment were also consistent with the Council’s recommendation in this regard
- The Council was also influential in including a focus on the impact of Brexit on children and young people in the Government’s agenda and in shaping the national debate
- The Council has operated effectively with a collegial approach that is supportive on one another and their respective priorities, devoid of politicking or territorialism.

2. Have the outcomes achieved since 2014 been successful?

There have been improvements in specific policy areas as indicated above. However, in general, we conclude that the promise and fanfare that attended the launch of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures has not been realised. Perhaps it was too ambitious but the Council’s overwhelming sense is that there has been insufficient priority given to the small number of changes that would deliver significant beneficial outcomes for children and young people whether due to a lack of political commitment or system inertia as evidenced by the failure to come close to meeting Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures’ target on child poverty.

3. Do you think Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures has helped better the relationship between statutory and non-statutory sector?

There have been improvements, particularly where Departments have engaged but there is a need for much greater strengthening of relationships generally. The Council notes that it does not have a
relationship with Tusla at all, but would like to understand how it can be helpful to Tusla as a key implementing body.

4. **What have been the achievements for children and young people?**

For most children and young people there is some evidence of things getting better but we need to guard against complacency. *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* has only started to focus on systemic issues but has raised the visibility of children and young people’s issues in central government for example, the Cabinet subcommittee on social policy gets to hear of the issues.

5. **What have been the most serious shortcomings in achieving Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures targets to date?**

For children at the margins, little has changed. Some families are worse off, new issues have emerged, for example, child homelessness while old ones have got worse, for example, child poverty. The children who were doing well in 2014, are still doing well; those who were not doing well continue to struggle while others have joined them. Systemic inequalities have not been addressed evidence suggests that economic growth is not only not helping children at the margins but the situation of some is getting worse e.g. homelessness.

- The increased level of child and youth poverty and the continuing failure to meet the *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* child poverty target
- Despite having a strategy, we are still inclined to react to a crisis
- No inroads have been made on structural inequality and this is a serious shortcoming
- Child homelessness didn’t exist in 2014 and is still getting worse with insufficient effective intervention
- There is a continuing risk of a “what’s the point” paralysis risk
- There is an urgent need for and increased and sharper focus on inequality

**Identification of learning and innovative practices to date:**

In relation to:

1. **Delivery/implementation of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures**

While the focus has largely been on child poverty, the real issue is systemic inequality. There is a need for new thinking on how to address structural and systemic inequality with a need for more integrated Governmental responses including budget-sharing, poverty is not just about income transfers but there is a sense that Departments do not really understand child poverty.

2. **Collaboration**

There are several examples, and growing experience, of positive collaboration but serious shortcomings remain.
3. Progress to date

The Council has identified both positive and negative aspects of the implementation of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures as detailed above.

4. Outcome of actions

It would be useful to compile a Report Card on the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures implementation to date to quantify the extent to which it has delivered.

While the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures process has delivered to a degree, it has not delivered so much in terms of specific commitments and their direct impact on the lives of children and young people. For example, in general the Council considers that the Department of Children and Youth Affairs have done a sterling job with the implementation process and punched above its weight, yet it has not, as yet, produced an early years strategy. How can we work better to achieve what the system sets as priorities for itself?

5. New areas/policies/issues that developed

- Child homelessness
- Education and systemic inequalities
- The challenge that parents face in getting the necessary support services for specific children in school when they should be automatic
- Continuing effects of the crisis – while the government did try to maintain allowances for families, the cutbacks in essential support services have been really damaging

Impact on children and young people:

1. Has Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures had a positive impact on the lives of children and young people?

Many children and young people are doing fine but there’s a significant cohort who are not, the children who need Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures the most, continue to be failed.

Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures is all future-oriented for children and young people it does not focus on the present for children.

What is the value that has been added for children – would the changes have happened anyway, for example, curriculum reform? Possibly, but they also offer early wins, if they are put within the context of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, that can then leverage more significant outcomes.

2. Do you think that children and young people are achieving better outcomes as a result of the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures Policy Framework?

As before, the majority are doing reasonably well, but those at the margins and those most vulnerable continue to struggle and there is little sign that this will change in the short term.
3. To what extent do children and young people have a voice in policy that affects their lives?

The Participation Strategy and the development of the Participation Hub are very positive developments. However, under 6 year olds, who represent 43% of the child and youth population (0 to 24yrs) remain virtually hidden and unheard.

Determine content, theme and course of action for phase 2 of implementation 2018-2020:

1. What are the top priorities for Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures going forward?

The Council are in the process of developing their workplan for 2018 and have agreed to focus on specific issues rather than examining a broader range of challenges that face children and young people. The Council agreed to continue to progress the issues of Learning and Development, Child Poverty, Child Homelessness and Rights and Equality. Mental Health and Wellbeing and Prevention and Early Intervention are issues that are cross cutting and feed into the Council’s priorities for 2018. The Council have reviewed and examined the work currently being done by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and other relevant Departments such as Employment Affairs and Social Protection and have aligned their workplan with the priority issues facing children and young people in Ireland. Much work has been done by the Council on Child Poverty with the combined effort of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and the Council have agreed on a renewed focus on this going forward. To build upon this successful collaboration, the Council will focus on replicating this technique in holding a roundtable style event to discuss the issue of Child Homelessness, inviting members from Government Departments and the non-statutory sector to come together to collaborate and discuss an action plan going forward.

Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures has the opportunity to work with a range of stakeholders and Government Departments on issues that affect the children and young people of Ireland. Thus far, a whole-of-Government approach has been successful in some Government Departments but not all. There needs to be engagement from all relevant Government Departments to successfully tackle these priorities going forward. The Council have had successful engagement from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection but have had a lesser response from other Departments. The Council will continue to engage with Government Departments to progress on issues facing children and young people.

2. Should a renewed action plan for Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures be developed? If so, what should it look like and include?

The Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures policy is a lengthy document capturing one hundred and sixty three commitments in total. These commitments hold Government Departments and statutory agencies responsible for taking a lead role in delivering an outcome. There should be a renewed action plan which focuses on top priorities going forward while continuing to hold Government Departments and statutory agencies accountable for their commitments.

3. What do you want to see changed or improved in the second phase of implementation?

It would be helpful to get communications advice – while it may be too late to re-brand Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, this should be considered in the context of the next strategy for children and young people. It would be better if it were titled e.g. “The National Policy Framework for
Children and Young People” or “Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures for Children and Young People.” This would help with the awareness and visibility of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures as the National Policy Framework for the Government.

As mentioned before, engagement between Government Departments and stakeholders has considerable scope for improvement. The Council have not yet developed a relationship with Tusla which should be worked on the in the coming year as Tusla are the head agency for children and young people.

It is important for the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures Mid-Term Review to hold Government Departments and stakeholders accountable for the progress of actions. It is also important to note that certain Departments and stakeholders are not as engaged as others and it was discussed that the Department of Justice and Equality are not members of the Sponsors Group. The Department hold a significant role in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures and in the lives of children and young people and it has been advised that they should be invited to become a member of the Sponsors Group.

4. How can Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures achieve better impact for children and young people in its second phase to 2020?

Many children and young people are doing fine but there’s a significant cohort who are not – the children who need Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures the most, continue to be failed. Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures is all future-oriented for children and young people, it does not focus on the present for children.

What is the value that has been added for children, would the changes have happened anyway, for example, curriculum reform? Possibly, but they also offer early wins, if they are put within the context of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, that can then leverage more significant outcomes.

As before, the majority are doing reasonably well, but those at the margins and those most vulnerable continue to struggle and there is little sign that this will change in the short term.

Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures has raised the visibility of issues facing children and young people such as mental health, child poverty and rights and equality. There needs to be a renewed focus by Government in 2018 on the lives of children and young people. Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures was established to have a lasting impact on the lives of children and young people and the focus needs to turn to long term policies and strategies that will have a lasting impact. The Department of Health have developed the Healthy Ireland Initiative which seeks to decrease the rate of child obesity in Ireland and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs are in the process of working on the Quality and Capacity Building Initiative which focuses on prevention and early intervention. There needs to be more initiatives in place like these that will have a lifelong impact on children and young people.

5. What would you like to see remain the same for phase 2 of implementation?

The implementation infrastructure; Children and Young People’s Policy Consortium, Sponsors, the Advisory Council, the implementation team in Department of Children and Youth Affairs, EU Structured Dialogue and Comhairle na nÓg has helped to bring about a change of working for
Government Departments, statutory agencies and the non-statutory sector. There has been a whole-of-government approach to tackling issues such as child poverty. As previously stated, the Council have benefitted from building relationships with different Government Departments and agencies. There is still a ways to go to establish engagement from all Government Departments but there is a sense that challenges facing children and young people is an issue for the whole of Government. The implementation infrastructure has provided a platform for an open dialogue between Government Departments and stakeholders to engage and collaborate at the Children and Young People’s Policy Consortium.

6. **How can Department of Children and Youth Affairs help the Advisory Council going forward?**

As previously stated, the Council and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs have established a solid working relationship. The Department and the Council meet five times a year and the Chair of the Council attends the Consortium meetings to update members of the Council’s work to date. It was suggested that the minutes of the Advisory Council meetings could be disseminated to the Consortium and the Sponsors Group and perhaps theirs with the Council. It was also noted to invite the Taoiseach to a Consortium meeting in 2018 which bring more awareness to *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* and it would be a chance for the Taoiseach to engage with the Government Departments and stakeholders involved in the policy framework.

7. **How can the Advisory Council evolve during the implementation of phase 2?**

The Advisory Council are committed to progressing actions in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* and to improving the lives of children and young people in Ireland. The Council will continue to promote *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* and to build on relationships with a mutual goal established between Government Departments and stakeholders. A new Chair will be in place by early 2018 appointed by the Minister which will help to re-focus the Council.

The Advisory Council will advise the Minister on matters such as Brexit and be available to other Government Departments to advise and provide information on matters that affects children and young people. The Council will establish themselves in the public on matters such as child homelessness and child poverty.