

# **Project to Scope the Evaluation of the Continuous Learning Framework**

## **Summary Report**

**for the Scottish Social Services Council**

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### **1.0 Background**

- 1.1 The Continuous Learning Framework (CLF) was developed by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) and the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS). It was published in December 2008. The CLF aims to improve the quality of outcomes for people who use social services by supporting the workforce delivering these services to be the best they can be. It sets out what people working in social services need to be able to do their jobs well now and in the future as well as what their employer needs to do to support them.
- 1.2 The CLF is not mandatory. It is designed to support individuals and organisations with the vision for learning and development in their own context. A wide range of different approaches to using the CLF in practice is therefore expected to emerge. A strategy is in place to support the embedding of the CLF in practice across the social services sector.

### **2.0 Evaluation of the CLF**

- 2.1 The SSSC is committed to evaluating the take up, use and impact of the CLF from 2009-2012. An evaluation strategy has been developed to outline broad proposals that would help to establish:
  - (i) awareness, take up and uses of the CLF across the social services sector,
  - (ii) the impact of the CLF on the practice and development of social service workers and their employers and
  - (iii) the impact of the CLF on the quality of service received and the outcomes for people who use services and their carers.
- 2.2 In keeping with the spirit of engagement and consultation that characterised the development of the CLF, it was agreed that the evaluation should be shaped in discussion with stakeholders from across the sector. The evaluation needed to be as rigorous as possible whilst avoiding placing unnecessary additional burdens on organisations. A spin-off benefit from the consultation process was expected to be raised awareness of evaluation issues by those involved, and increased commitment by organisations to self-evaluate.

### **3.0 The scoping project**

- 3.1 The scoping project was commissioned to help address the issues identified at 2.2 above.
- 3.2 Consultation included discussion about the importance of evaluation, the shape of the proposed evaluation strategy and the tools and support needed to develop and share thinking and skills, both for the national evaluation strategy and for self-evaluation.

## **4.0 Method**

- 4.1 The project brief identified three key tasks. These were (i) desk-based research (ii) focus group discussions and (iii) face to face and telephone interviews with key participants.
- 4.2 A focus group of between 2 and 5 participants was set up by each Learning Network to meet the project timetable. All focus groups followed a similar pattern that included discussion of participants' use and interest in the CLF, general principles of evaluation design with specific suggestions and issues being raised by the group, and involvement of service users and carers in the evaluation. A draft template of indicators (see paragraph 6.7.18) was also discussed and, where agreed, this was then sent out by email for further comment.
- 4.3 A similar approach to that outlined for focus groups was taken for individual interviews (telephone and face to face). However, discussion particularly focused on specific issues of relevance to the participants' roles.
- 4.4 The desk-based research consisted of (i) reviewing key documents proposed in the brief and (ii) following leads from participants in the consultation to ascertain the broad relevance and possible contribution of existing documents and reports to the evaluation.

## **5.0 Participants in the Consultation**

- 5.1 Participants were either from private, voluntary or statutory services, or were individuals, known to the Learning Networks, who were able to provide a service user or carer perspective.
- 5.2 No attempt was made to draw a statistically representative sample at this early stage of the embedding strategy as it was considered more important to engage with individuals who were using, or were otherwise familiar with, the CLF. All participants had thought about how the CLF could be used within their own setting, had done some initial thinking about how it might be evaluated and were committed to contributing to discussions. Participants were not asked to represent their organisations formally in discussions.
- 5.3 Organisations supporting the use of CLF across the sector in partnership with SSSC were also involved in discussions, either to set up and contribute to focus groups (Learning Networks) or through separate meetings.
- 5.4 A list of the stakeholders and organisations participating in the scoping project is attached as an appendix.

## **6.0 Key findings and Discussion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

- 6.1.1 The consultation provided a rich source of data that were captured in separate documents and then collated by theme.
- 6.1.2 Consensus around themes emerged quite quickly with similar issues being raised by a variety of participants in different contexts. The following paragraphs in this section provide a summary of the key points raised under each theme.

## **6.2 General comments relating to CLF**

6.2.1 A high degree of enthusiasm for the CLF was evident amongst participants. Some potential challenges in implementing it were highlighted and some questions were raised about the fit between CLF and other agenda and processes. The issue of whether the CLF should be voluntary or mandatory was raised in a number of discussions, without consensus being reached. Some participants expressed a view that a mandatory approach might help to legitimise its use whilst others thought that retaining a voluntary approach was important to stimulate creativity and innovation and avoid another 'tick-box' exercise.

## **6.3 Experience and use of the CLF**

6.3.1 Discussions suggested that CLF use was at an early stage in most organisations but that a high level of creative thinking about its potential use in developing learning and practice was evident.

## **6.4 Evaluating the CLF - General Issues**

6.4.1 Unsurprisingly at this early stage of implementation, some discussions indicated that there were overlaps in thinking between 'embedding' and 'evaluating' the CLF and some participants felt too new to it to be clear about evaluation. The importance of learning from others, both about how the CLF was being used and about how to evaluate its impact, was raised in all discussions.

6.4.2 Generally, the importance of starting the evaluation process at an early stage was recognised but discussions also highlighted a need for support to be provided to organisations. The presence of a range of databases that might be available to help with selecting samples was highlighted. Specific support for the evaluation process was offered by the Association of Directors of Social Work, the Voluntary Social Service Sector Workforce Development Unit and the Private Care Sector Workforce Initiative.

6.4.3 Some participants expressed concern that asking people to collect additional data for evaluation could feel overwhelming. This was seen to be less of an issue where data collected for other purposes could be linked. Some contributors pointed out that not everything needed to be evaluated at once and others felt that attributing success to the CLF might be difficult when there are so many other things impacting on people's lives and organisational contexts.

6.4.4 Managers from two of the former 'trials' participated in the discussions and they confirmed that their organisations were still using the CLF. Whilst only limited written evidence of its impact had been collected so far, they were clear the CLF was having a positive impact and they gave examples of the evidence on which they had based their views.

## **6.5 Contributors to the Evaluation**

6.5.1 A number of comments were made about the importance of including all relevant stakeholders in the evaluation. It was recognised that professional bodies and organisations with an 'overarching' or supporting role could help to promote evaluation and minimise potential duplication in data collection.

6.5.2 Despite some participants' newness to using the CLF, all were keen to think about how they might evaluate it in their own organisations and contexts. A number of participants made specific bids for their organisations, or organisations in their part of the sector, to be included as case studies.

6.5.3 Many participants stressed a desire to include service users and carers in the evaluation. In view of the importance of this issue, it is discussed separately below.

## **6.6 Service User and Carer Involvement in Evaluation**

6.6.1 The role of service users and carers in the evaluation process was specifically addressed in all of the focus groups and most of the interviews.

6.6.2 Comments covered the role of service users and carers in service delivery generally, the value of advocacy or representative groups and current practices and methods of involvement in evaluation.

6.6.3 There was complete agreement about the principle of including service users and carers in the evaluation. A number of potential challenges were also highlighted. Some participants thought that service users and carers would be more interested in outcomes and how they are treated than in the detail of CLF. Nevertheless, some clear suggestions about possible options emerged.

6.6.4 It was particularly helpful that one of the focus groups included the carer for a current service user as this provided some valuable insights into the potential (and in this case actual) desire for involvement in evaluation and into a possible mechanism for this to happen.

## **6.7 Research Design**

### **Introduction**

6.7.1 A range of comments was made about the evaluation design generally as well as about some specific issues relating to the proposed questionnaire and case study research. Across all the discussions, there was an overwhelming sense that the most important and helpful way to evaluate CLF at this stage in the embedding strategy would be to develop descriptions of its impact in different contexts. This would include descriptions of how the CLF was being used as well as narrative, with evidence, of how it is perceived to be adding value. A number of specific themes emerged across the various conversations that took place. These are reported, for clarity, under the headings below.

### **Research Design - General Comments**

6.7.2 The general comments reflected participants' recognition that a number of factors influence change in service delivery and, as a result, evaluation of outcomes can be difficult to achieve. Several suggestions were made, however, about how evaluation could be managed. There was a clear sense that, at this early stage, it would be important to avoid creating an overly complex process, as well as recognition that tangible evidence of change will be important. The suggestions that were made over the course of the project have been reported to the SSSC. The following paragraphs in this section provide a brief summary of the key issues raised.

### **Research Design – Survey**

6.7.3 Some concern was raised about the desirability of gathering a lot of data using questionnaires. This largely related to workload issues resulting from the plethora of questionnaires being distributed already. The general view was that short, on-line surveys would be the best option but it was recognised that high response rates might still be hard to achieve.

6.7.4 Generally, it was thought that questionnaires seeking to determine awareness and take-up of the CLF should not also be used to gather detailed information about its

use in specific contexts. Survey design and timing issues were thought to be important, particularly in relation to generating reasonable response rates and reducing the likelihood of responses being based on perceived 'right answers'.

- 6.7.5 A number of specific comments were made about possible confusion if questionnaires were to arrive unannounced by email. Suggestions about how to avoid this included involving umbrella groups, professional bodies and network organisations in promotion and distribution.
- 6.7.6 The question of embedding CLF questions in existing data gathering exercises was discussed but it was decided that this may not provide a suitable solution because of the risk of duplication as well as difficulties relating to coordinating the timing of data collection for different purposes.
- 6.7.7 Discussion about how to target questionnaires within each organisation so that they reached the correct people elicited a number of helpful comments.

### **Research Design - Case Study**

- 6.7.8 There was considerable support for including case studies in the evaluation as it was believed that this would facilitate the collection of rich data that could not easily be gathered through surveys. The longitudinal nature of the case studies was welcomed. Several organisations expressed a desire to be included as a case study, whilst others simply made a plea that an organisation within their part of the sector be included.
- 6.7.9 It was recognised that only a small number of case studies could be supported but there seemed to be widespread enthusiasm for self-evaluation, subject to support being made available.

### **Research Design - Use of Stories**

- 6.7.10 Linked to the discussions about case studies was a view that 'stories' should be developed as part of the evaluation. This emerged a number of times. Associations were made with additional suggestions including creating 'reflective diaries' (6.7.14) and presenting at events (6.7.16). There was a strong consensus that 'stories' and descriptive reflection were the most powerful mechanisms to facilitate understanding about the use and impact of the CLF and that these could help to engage people in learning from the experience of others.
- 6.7.11 The idea of developing a structured format or 'template' that people could use to record their 'stories' was welcomed. It was recognised that such a 'template' would be most useful if it prompted for information about things that did not work, as well as those that seemed to be successful. The 'templates' could be analysed periodically over time to draw out common themes and issues.
- 6.7.12 There was also a call for 'stories' to be recorded in a variety of media. Both written and video material was felt to be useful for inclusion in on-line support networks.

### **Research Design – Other Proposals**

- 6.7.13 A range of other suggestions about how evaluation might best be facilitated were discussed.
- 6.7.14 Of particular interest was an idea to engage people in completing 'reflective journals'. This would potentially elicit more personal reflections of the value of the CLF in practice than might be the case with 'stories'. It would also allow data to be collected from a variety of perspectives because managers, practitioners, service

users and carers could each maintain a 'diary'. To avoid compromising confidentiality, the diaries would remain the property of their authors, but, at agreed intervals, summaries of the issues that had been drawn from the personal reflections could be analysed.

### **Research Design – Networking Events**

6.7.15 A clear need was expressed for support by 'experts' as well as by peers. Some of the required support was requested to be made available through events and support networks.

6.7.16 Whilst electronic communication was thought by some to be most useful in the early stages of the embedding strategy, others placed a high value on face-to-face exchange of knowledge, believing this to be the only way real understanding would emerge. Both local and national events were thought to have value in different circumstances. It was recognised that attracting people who are not yet using CLF would be an important issue to address.

### **Research Design - Virtual networks/on-line support**

6.7.17 In addition to face-to-face events, most participants thought that on-line support and virtual networks were important, both to provide peer support and 'expert' advice.

### **Research Design - Template of Indicators**

6.7.18 The 'performance indicator template' that had already been drafted by SSSC and IRISS was discussed with participants towards the end of the meetings to allow innovative ideas to be raised in advance of being given a pre-conceived structure. Without exception, the template format was welcomed, although some participants commented that it looked a little daunting. A number of helpful comments about what should be included in the template were made, either in discussion or at a later stage, by email.

### **Research Design - Links to existing data and data collected for other purposes**

6.7.19 The issue of making appropriate links to data already collected for other purposes was thought to be important. Comments reflected a desire to see clearer links between the CLF and existing documents, standards and processes. Although a number of these have been embedded within the CLF, better 'road mapping' between them seems likely to be welcomed.

## **7.0 Document analysis and discussion with SWIA and Care Commission**

7.1.1 Consultations highlighted the breadth of data that is collected by other organisations and for other purposes. Whilst much of it has a great deal of relevance to the CLF evaluation, particularly in relation to the drive towards service improvement, difficulties of ensuring compatibility between data descriptions or timing of data collection were discussed. Whilst it may not be feasible to combine data collection processes, it will be valuable for SSSC to keep open channels of communication with relevant bodies so that lessons learned from the CLF evaluation can inform future joint planning where appropriate.

## 8.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

- 8.1 The consultation to scope the evaluation of the CLF demonstrated considerable awareness across the sector of some of the challenges associated with evaluating the take up, use and impact of the CLF. These include ensuring that the sample of organisations selected to receive surveys is robust, distributing questionnaires in a way that will not disguise the true picture of awareness and use within organisations, obtaining adequate response rates and measuring impact when variables cannot be controlled.
- 8.2 Despite these challenges, participants in the consultation demonstrated a high level of commitment to evaluation, as well as inventiveness and creativity in seeking appropriate solutions.
- 8.3 Discussions covered a wide range of issues and some clear themes emerged. These have been reported along with the recommendations that are outlined in brief below.

### 8.4 Summary of Recommendations:

1. An electronic survey tool should be used to design and distribute short, annual questionnaires to evaluate take-up and use of the CLF. These should target a sample of organisations that are proportionate to the different organisation types and sizes across all parts of the sector.
2. Between 6 and 8 case studies should be completed. Consideration should be given to the need to include different parts of the sector to ensure that research findings are relevant to all.
3. Organisations across the sector should be invited to opt-in to an ongoing process of self-evaluation. Appropriate support mechanisms should be developed (see below). In addition, a sample of organisations, constituting as representative a cross-section of organisations across the sector as possible<sup>1</sup>, should be selected to form a 'Panel' of organisations who are willing to engage in the national evaluation study. These organisations would commit to responding to questionnaires and becoming involved in other evaluation mechanisms as agreed.
4. Interviews with a sample of organisations that have decided not to use the CLF should be included in the evaluation.
5. A structured format or 'template' for 'story-telling' and sharing of experience and reflections should be developed.
6. Further consultation about their potential contribution to the CLF evaluation should be undertaken with a range of service user and carer groups.
7. Consultation with partner groups, professional bodies and networks should continue so that they receive the information and support they need to promote and support evaluation in their day-to-day work and at their events. This should be co-ordinated

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<sup>1</sup> It may not be possible to select a 'representative' sample of organisations using CLF at this stage since early CLF users are likely to be 'enthusiasts'. Further, owing to the small number likely to be using the CLF, it may not be possible to draw a sample that is proportionate to the organisation profile in the sector. It may be necessary to await feedback on CLF take-up and use prior to making firm decisions about samples for further research.

with the ongoing embedding strategy so that evaluation is developed as an integral part of adopting the CLF. A small number of national events that include a focus on evaluation should be considered in addition to local events.

- 8.** An introductory 'Guide' for those new to evaluation should be prepared and uploaded to the website to provide initial support. This should be supplemented by peer support and the provision of opportunities to receive on-line and telephone advice and support in relation to evaluation, for example via the Learning Networks.
- 9.** The SSSC/CLF web site should include appropriate links to other websites and provide space for on-line conversations as well as resources that will support evaluation. It is envisaged that, as organisations develop their own tools and expertise, materials will be uploaded to provide peer support and knowledge sharing as appropriate.
- 10.** The 'performance indicator template' should be further developed in consultation (possibly with the 'Panel') and made available on the website.

### **Stakeholders/Organisations involved in discussions:**

Aberdeenshire Council

ADSW

Alpha Home Care

Angus Council

Ark Housing

Borders Council

Carer

Dundee University

East Dunbartonshire Council

Fife Council

Gowrie Care

Inspire

Key Housing

Midlothian Council

Perth Association for Mental Health (PAMH)

Private Care Sector Workforce Initiative

Scottish Care at Home

Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care (Care Commission)

Scottish Pre-school Play Association

Scottish Social Services Learning Networks

Social Work Inspection Agency (SWIA)

Voluntary Social Services Sector Workforce Unit Team

West Dunbartonshire Council