An Introduction to evaluation for charities in criminal justice

This is an introduction to research and evaluation for Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCS) organisations working in criminal justice. It has been prepared for the Improving Your Evidence project run by Clinks and NPC during 2013-2014, and provides links to the resources prepared during that project.

It is divided into the following sections

If you have any comments/questions about the guidance please email: james.noble@thinknpc.org

1) Terminology

Before getting started it's useful to clarify what we mean by some of the terminology.

- **"Projects"** is the word we use throughout this document to refer to any kind of 'intervention', 'programme' or 'service' being provided by the VCSE sector, including the work of whole organisations.
- **"Evidence"** is information about projects. It can be either evidence you collect about your own projects or evidence from other sources that might be relevant.
- **"Research"** is the process of collecting evidence (for example conducting interviews, questionnaires, analysing data etc.)
- **"Monitoring"** refers to evidence collection for more routine purposes, particularly checking services are being delivered as planned.
- **"Evaluation"** is the process of using evidence, research and monitoring to understand and assess the performance of a project, and to learn from it.

It's also importance to recognise the difference between **"activities"**, which is the work you do, and **"impact"** or **"outcomes"**, which is the difference you make to peoples' lives and to communities.

More information on terminology can be found in our glossary:

http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/Evaluationglossary.pdf

2) Starting to think about evaluation

This section discusses some of the underlying and strategic issues around evaluation, which are important to think about *before* tackling the practical things we move onto later.

Why do we need to collect and use evidence about projects?[1]

- Meet the requirements of funders and commissioners.
- Help you communicate about your project.
- Give service users a voice and ensure they are represented in policy decisions
- Giving staff/volunteers a clearer picture of the value of their work - which can boost morale.
- Get a better understanding of how projects are working, so we can improve them and increase positive impact.
- To contribute to a wider evidence base about what works – helping to improve the sector as a whole.

You can also see a short video of different perspectives on evaluation here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDX8NmBm2TI&feature=youtu.be

It is worth considering how important each of these objectives is to you. It's likely that the needs of funders will be a priority, in which case it will be important to get an understanding of *their* views on evaluation and what *they* are interested in (see below). However, we also encourage you to *focus on learning* (the final two bullet points). These benefits are sometimes overlooked, but they are where evaluation can be particularly interesting and will help you increase your impact.

What is wrong with just using our own judgement?

If you are involved in delivering a project it's likely you'll have a sense of whether it is working or not and whether you are making a difference. But there are reasons why a more systematic approach to collecting evidence is also helpful:

- The world is complex, and you won't always be able to see or understand everything that is going on.
- You can't assume you are achieving impact on the basis of observation alone, you need to talk to the people involved. You should also talk to people who don't volunteer their views, as you can't generalise from one or two success stories.
- People will leave or graduate from projects, so unless you put effort into research you will not be able to see how influential the project has been in the long-run.
- External stakeholders are unlikely to be persuaded by your own observations and judgements; they need a more diverse and stronger selection of evidence.

[1] You can read more about the benefits of evaluation and impact assessment in the following NPC report: http://www.thinknpc.org/publications/a-journey-to-greater-impact/a-journey-to-greater-impact-2/?post-parent=4898

- Evidence helps donors and tax payers can be assured that money is being well spent
- Your judgements might be wrong. There are examples of charities who, while well-intentioned, have delivered projects which are ineffectual, or even harmful.

Evaluation and your organisation

The future of your organisation is likely to depend on whether you can show that your projects make a difference. More than this, evaluation should help you feel confident about the difference you are making and help you to improve services. For these reasons, your approach to evaluation should be seen as a central to your organisation's overall strategy.

There are some useful tools to help you think about this:

- Inspiring Impact is a resource to help you think more generally about the role of evaluation in your organisation, and the principles you should work to. In particular, the Code of Good Impact Practice provides broad guidelines for focusing on impact, while 'Measuring Up' is a diagnostic tool to help you assess your organisation's approach and find out where you might need to improve.
- Better Evaluation is an international website with a comprehensive set of materials.
- Charities Evaluation Services and NPC provide a range of materials and training.

Think about who will be reading your evaluation

Your evaluation will be better if you have a good understanding of who its audience will be[2] and their interests/requirements. You might want to consider questions like:

- What do they want to know from your evaluation?
- What sources of evidence do they value? What are their views about different approaches?
- What standards of evidence do they require? (see section below)
- What will they use the findings for?

To help with these questions, in our June 2013 conferences we asked a range of different stakeholders to discuss what 'good evidence' meant to them? A write-up of this can be found here.

http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/WhatMakesGoodEvidence.pdf

How much should I spend on monitoring and evaluation?

[2] Likely audiences are funders, commissioners, government and other stakeholders, but you should also consider yourself and your wider organisation as a potential audience for the work.

A rule of thumb is that 5-10 per cent of project costs are reasonable to spend on evaluation. But this is just a guide and there are reasons to spend less/more.

You might want to spend less if the project is well established and already supported by good evidence, in which case you may only need to ensure you are delivering services well enough. You might want to spend more when:

- You are piloting or testing a new approach, or trying something that has worked in a different setting.
- You cannot be confident that your project works, or if it works in the particular context in which you are working[3]
- Your funders or clients need persuading, or believe that projects can be improved.

Any proposals or bids to funders should note the costs for monitoring and evaluation and explain why it will be useful.

What should I be aiming for?

Our work with a range of Voluntary organisations during *Improving Your Evidence* has shown there is wide range of practice across the sector. Some organisations have been doing evaluation and collecting evidence for a while, and may have published evaluation reports, but others are just getting started. Often a successful evaluation strategy is the result of one person within an organisation taking on the task with enthusiasm and working to persuade everyone else to get involved.

Here are some tips to help you decide on the right approach for your organisation.

1) Proportionality: Data collection and evaluation ought not to have a negative effect on core project activities. For smaller projects you should ideally be collecting only a small amount of the most relevant evidence. You can also consider sampling rather than collecting evidence from everyone (see below).

2) Start at the beginning: Too often, people only start thinking about evaluation once a project is up and running. It should be a consideration from the planning stage onwards.

3) Use what's available: As far as possible you should draw on what is available and what has been done before. This includes; using any statutory or 'open' data you can get hold of; reviewing the existing research and evidence produced by Government or academics; and borrowing questionnaires and approaches from other organisations etc.

4) Get help: We have noticed that voluntary organisations that have a successful approach to evidence have often been active in talking to people and getting support where they can. In particular, universities and academics will usually be keen to advise, and some organisations have received a lot of support (for example post-graduate students running whole research projects). Funders and Government also have research departments who

[3] In some circumstances there may even the possibility that the project can cause harm, or at least take resources and time away from other more effective projects.

are willing to help and sector organisations like Clinks, NPC and CES who will be happy to talk to you and point you in the right direction.

5) Aim for high quality: The evidence you do collect should be good quality else it serves no purpose. This means you should develop a theory of change approach (see below) to decide what information you need to collect (i.e. in particular the outcomes you are working towards) and pay close attention to issues like sampling, questionnaire design and response rates (we cover these issues in the following sections).

6) Transparency: All aspects of your evaluation should be published, both the results and the methodology. This is so that others can assess the reliability and validity of the evidence and learn from what you have done.

7) Simplicity: Don't bite of more than you can chew. If you are doing this for the first time start small, interview a few people, write a short report. It is better to do a small, modest evaluation well than to be too ambitious and do everything badly.

8) Don't try to rely on one approach. Although it's an appealing thought there is no single or simple way to address all your evaluation questions. Be wary of organisations or consultants who purport to have the complete answer; there is no silver bullet. The best evidence can tell us whether a programme works, why it works, and who with. This sort of information comes from combining a range of data sources, which may be built up from a range of evaluations over time.**9) Involve people in planning and communicate the benefits of evaluation to the wider organisation.** Ideally the rest of your organisation will be interested and involved in your evaluation, including key stakeholders, which should include present or past beneficiaries. Communicating the benefits will elevate the importance of evaluation and encourage people to contribute.

3) Planning your evaluation

In this section we start to focus on the more on the practical aspects of designing and conducting evaluations. We have drawn from NPC's general approach to impact evaluation.

http://www.thinknpc.org/publications/npcs-four-pillar-approach/

Using the existing evidence base

Before deciding what and how to evaluate it is important to have a good understanding of what is already known from existing research. In particular you should focus on:

- The population you are working with (e.g. offenders).
- Interventions that have been tested are tried before.
- Good practice in delivering these interventions.

As part of Improving Your Evidence we have sought to compile the evidence. Please visit the links below to start accessing and using these resources:

http://www.clinks.org/support-evaluation-and-effectiveness/existing-evidence https://delicious.com/improving_evidence

A particularly important document is MoJ's review of the evidence base, which can be accessed below:

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/transforming-rehabilitation-a-summary-of-evidence-on-reducing-reoffending

If you don't have an academic background (or at least not recently), it can be daunting to use this research; indeed much of it is not even accessible because journals want you to pay for it.[4] This is why it is good to start with the general reviews highlighted in the links above. You may also be able to access help from academics themselves. A number of charities have developed good links with universities and secured help from students / academics at little or no cost.

What should evaluation focus on? Developing a theory of change

We suggest developing a 'theory of change' to help you decide what your evaluation should prioritise. Theory of change is simply a process for articulating how a project is intended to work, based upon the best available evidence (theory). A theory of change is often presented in a diagram (but doesn't have to be), and provides the basis for understanding how the activities you deliver are intended to lead to outcomes and impact for your service users.

The key point about theory of change is that if you cannot describe *how* a project is intended to work then you will not be able to evaluate it properly.

Although it can take time to do a theory of change, you don't have to collect any new evidence to prepare it[5] - so it's a 'quick win' - and it is valuable for a number of reasons, including:

- It will provide a clear description of how a project is intended to work, which is itself a basic requirement of many funders and commissioners and the first rung of most evidence hierarchies (see below).
- By highlighting the key elements of your project, a theory of change will direct you to what evidence you need to collect (and what evidence you don't).
- Taking a collaborative approach to preparing a theory of change can help strengthen your team by building a common understanding of how you work.
- It will help you to report your findings and assess whether your project has made a difference.

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[4] We have found that articles behind paywalls can usually be accessed simply by emailing the academic authors directly to ask for a copy.

[5] Although a theory of change is much stronger if you can show that it is bases it on evidence from previous research and projects you have run before.

You can see a short video of funders and providers discussing the benefits of theory of change here:

http://youtu.be/PnqmxbWApJ4

We have prepared separate guidance on theory of change which you can access here:

http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/TheoryofChangeGuide.pdf

Some example theories of change can be seen in our library here:

http://www.clinks.org/support-evaluation-and-effectiveness/demonstrating-outcomes

Prioritising

As you develop a theory of change and think about evaluation you should also start to consider what your priorities are, and there a three different levels where this applies.

a) Prioritising which projects to evaluate

Firstly, you may need to decide which of your projects to evaluate. If you work in a large organisation it is neither possible nor desirable to evaluate everything you do. Rather, we suggest selecting a relatively small number of projects and using the findings from these to develop more general conclusions. The most obvious approach is to choose projects that are typical, but you might choose to evaluate an atypical project if you have been experimenting with different ideas. More pragmatic considerations may also play a part, such as whether the staff working on a project are willing or have the capacity to be involved.

b) Prioritising evaluation questions

The second level of prioritisation is about using your theory of change (and your assessment of stakeholders' needs) to decide what your most important evaluation questions are. It helps to think about the following three questions.

1. What and how much did we do?
2. How well did we do it?
3. Is anyone better off?

Question 1 relates to inputs, activities and outputs and is the easiest to answer because it's simply about recording what you do. Unfortunately, many evaluations get stuck at this level whereas the priority is usually to address questions 2 and 3.

Question 2 is more important and slightly more challenging to answer. It it's about what your project is like, on the day, how good it is and how well service users react. It helps to break the question down into two further elements:

a) **Quality** is about how well you deliver. It can refer to a very wide range of things; staff recruitment, training and supervision; service standards, outreach efforts, information collection and sharing, procedures and protocols etc. Below is a useful resource to help you think about what quality means when delivering projects in criminal justice (referred to as practice skills)

http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/37432/0011296.pdf

b) **Engagement** is about how service users respond and interact with you. It includes issues such as the type of relationship you establish with them; whether they listen to what you say and whether they act on your advice.

It also relates to *which* users you engage; such as whether you are building relationships with the hardest to reach.

Engagement is important, because very few projects with (ex) offenders will work if you cannot establish effective relationships. It's also very measurable (through user questionnaires and informal feedback), so it should almost certainly be an important aspect of both your theory of change and evaluation approach.

Question 3 is about the difference you make to people's lives. It can be usefully divided into shorter-term changes in peoples' knowledge / skills, attitudes and behaviours (intermediate outcomes) and the long-term goals that these changes will contribute to (e.g. reduced offending behaviour, improved well-being, increased employment).

This is probably the most valuable question to answer, but also the hardest. Change for service users is gradual and long-term (possibly well after your project has done its work) and you are not the only factor or project in peoples' lives. Options for answering this question may include:

- Self-reported change (i.e. questionnaires and interviews at the end of a project).
- Qualitative research in which you talk to service users in more depth to get a full understand of whether and how the project has affected them.
- Views of other people who know your service users (prison / probation officers, social workers, family members).
- Longitudinal follow-up interviews (i.e. trying to get in touch with people after 6 months or a year).
- Official data such as reoffending rates from the MOJ data lab (see below), prison behaviour reports / adjudications, data on employment or other outcomes.
- Case studies of success stories.

So how to prioritise across these three questions? There are two factors to weigh up.

- **What is practical/doable?** In most situations the three questions above will increase in both importance and difficulty, so there will inevitably be a trade-off. We have found that it helps to be opportunistic; there could be creative ways to get information on outcomes, especially if you talk to partners and other organisations that may already collect data you need. If there is a chance to get some data to help you answer question 3 then this is probably a priority.

- **What is already known?** It helps that there may already be good evidence to support links in your theory of change. For example, the link between an intermediate outcome like 'reduced substance misuse' and a final outcome like 'reduced offending' has been demonstrated in many previous research studies. Similarly if you are able show that you service users have a more positive outlook and identity because of your project, you can bring in other evidence to show that this is accepted as an important part of the journey to desistance (from both academic research and professional experience).

To help you work out which evaluation questions are most important is to imagine you are someone who is sceptical about the project and doesn't think it works: What questions would that person ask? What would they want to know?

c) Prioritising which service users to conduct research with

The third level of prioritisation relates to which service users you collect evidence from.

Sometimes, voluntary organisations assume that they need to collect information from all their service users, but this is only necessary if your project is running on a small scale. A less costly option is a two-tiered approach in which you collect a relatively small amount of information about all your service users (for example, attendance and engagement) and more detailed information from a sample from whom you can *generalise* about the wider population. If you plan to select a sample is vital to ensure it is representative of all your service users (not just the easiest to get hold of). Our guide to sampling goes into more detail:

http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/IntroductionToSampling_0.pdf

Choosing a level of evidence

Different types of research are associated with different levels of certainty and confidence in the findings. You may hear people talk about 'levels of rigour' and 'standards of evidence.' For example; small scale qualitative studies are regarded as 'weak'; questionnaires - properly administered - are 'stronger'; and repeated comparison group studies are 'strongest' of all.

We have written in more detail about standards of evidence here:

http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/StandardsofEvidenceGuide.pdf

The key point is that what is appropriate and desirable will depend upon the audience you are trying to engage and the question(s) you are asking. What is important is that the level of evidence:

- Is proportionate to the size of the project, amount of money involved and the risk of doing harm as well as good. A low-budget programme that, at worst, could do little harm does not need the same level of evidence of a costly intervention that could do a lot of damage to people.
- Fits with the stage of development. An innovative programme that is being tested does needs more evidence than a mature programme that delivers established interventions.

A good set of standards for Voluntary organisations has been developed by Project Oracle, which is a London based project looking to improve the use of evidence by organisations working with young people[6]. They have defined standards with five levels of evidence. Level 1 (entry level) requires a sound theory of change or logic model with clear plans for evaluation and level 5 is the highest, requiring a 'system-ready' intervention that has been subject to multiple independent replication evaluations and cost-benefit analysis. We suggest that most organisations should be working towards achieving level 3.

http://project-oracle.com/projects/standards-of-evidence/

Comparison group studies and Randomised Control Trials (RCT)

Comparison group studies, and in particular Randomised Control Trials (RCTs), are regarded as the strongest forms of evidence. The idea behind an RCT is to randomly assign service users to either a 'treatment' group, who receive a service, or a 'control group' who do not; with the difference in outcomes representing the impact of the service. They can also be used to test different options *within* a service, for example whether weekly or fortnightly mentoring appointments have more impact.

Results from comparison group studies can be very convincing and are essential for achieving level 3 in the Project Oracle standards mentioned above.

If you are interested in this area of research we have written a guide to comparison group studies, including a number of case studies of charities who have used the approach or something similar.

http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/UsingControlGroupApproachesToIdentifyImpact.pdf

A key point made in the guidance is that while a full RCT may not be feasible for most charities, there may still be opportunities to conduct research or analysis that mimics the basic design (known as quasi random approaches), and which may decisively improve your level of evidence.

[6] This scale is closely aligned to similar scales developed by the Social Research Unit and Nesta

A final point on levels of evidence is to stress that you should not be looking for 'proof' but rather a **persuasive case** about whether or not your projects have made a difference. Proving the impact of social interventions is difficult and nearly always beyond the reach of VCSE led evaluations. Rather you should be looking to combine as many evidence sources as possible (triangulation) and using the information as best you can to outline a case (while being clear about the limitations or gaps in the evidence you have collected).

The Justice Data Lab,

Possibly the best opportunity you have to get a high standard of evidence is to use the Justice Data Lab. This is an innovative service provided by the Ministry of Justice which gives organisations working with ex-offenders access to data on reconviction rates.

To use the justice data lab Voluntary organisations need to send the MoJ the names and dates of birth of ex-offenders they have worked with and information about when and what services were provided.[7] The MoJ then provides;

a) a profile of these offenders by a range of variables;

b) the reconviction rate for that group; and

c) data on the frequency of reconviction.

In addition, using a statistical approach called propensity score matching, MoJ also provides the **reconviction rate for a matched control group of similar offenders**, which enables organisations to see if their project is associated with any difference in outcomes in reoffending rates. For more information about the data lab go to:

http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/MoJ%20Data%20Lab%20briefing.pdf

There are some drawbacks to the data lab. It can be difficult for charities to gather the data and MoJ cannot always identify service users in their database. In addition, the variables used to match the control group are not exhaustive, which means that other unknown factors may be behind some of the findings. There is also the problem that the reconviction rate is only one measure of the progress charities achieve with clients, and is subject to baises of its own.

Notwithstanding these issues, the main appeal of the data lab is that it helps Voluntary organisations answer the key question of whether their services have had an impact on reconviction rates *to a level 3 standard of evidence*. Moreover it provides this analysis quickly and at no cost (other than the time taken to get offenders' details together).

[7] The minimum sample size you can submit is 60 offenders, so it can't be used by smaller charities.

3) Collecting evidence

In this section we look at the different approaches you can use to conduct research and collect evidence.

Who to collect evidence from?

The views of **service users** should be integral to any research or evaluation process. Speaking to service users provides us with an understanding of what matters to people, what makes services effective and what their impact has been. Indeed, the success of your evaluation approach is likely to be dependent on whether a representative group of users has been engaged.

However they can be a challenging group to engage with, especially in criminal justice, where literacy levels are lower than average and service users have a variety of complex needs which might prevent them form engaging with you. In addition, people in the criminal justice system are subject to a lot of assessment and form filling and there is a risk that your research will be seen as just another box ticking exercise.

The guidance below explores these issues in more depth and offers suggestions for an effective strategy for engaging service users in research.

http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/AchievingUserParticipationResearch.pdf

Longitudinal research

Longitudinal research means research that is done with the same group of people over a period of time. So rather than just getting a snapshot you start to learn how people change (as a result of your project or for other reasons). It's a powerful type of research because it can show the long-term impact of a project, but it is perhaps underused by voluntary organisations because it entails effort to stay in touch with people (which can be difficult when people have moved on to other things).

Staff and volunteers are another important source of evidence for your projects (and are sometimes overlooked). The guidance below gives you further advice on how to approach research with staff and volunteers.

http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/InvolvingStaffVolulnteerInEvaluation.pdf

The final group you can collect evidence from are other people who either; know your service users; work with them; or have a perspective on your project (known as stakeholders). Many of the issues covered by the guide on involving staff and volunteers are also relevant to this group.

A potential source of information from stakeholders is any data or evidence *they* collect on your service users, and which they might be willing to share. If you are working together on an ongoing basis, it would be worth sharing your theories of change to see what extent outcomes are consistent and whether they could be measured jointly. If an organisation is referring people to you then it is worth discussing the information they hold and whether they will agree to pass that on to you as part of the service agreement.

Evidence collection methods

There are a range of different methods for conducting research and collecting evidence, but before describing these, it is worth making some general points:

- It is good to combine as many sources of evidence as possible to test your theory of change (a process referred to as 'triangulation'), including both quantitative and qualitative evidence ("*no numbers without stories, no stories without numbers").*
- It's likely that you already collect or hold a significant amount of evidence and data. Take stock of what you already know before deciding on new data collection.
- Whichever methods you chose it's important to make sure you get a good cross-section of participants; and in particular to involve people *who would not normally volunteer to be consulted.*
- Different approaches will work for different groups. Remember, the quality of the data will depend on the degree to which people are prepared to co-operate with you. It is therefore a good idea to briefly explain to participants why you need the data, what you intend to do with it, and ask them if they would like to be told about your findings.
- Make sure any requests for information are reasonable, clearly presented and well thought-out. The best way to check this is to recruit one or two 'guinea pigs' and see how long it takes for them (or you) to gather the information needed. What may look like a simple questionnaire on paper may prove difficult or confusing in practice.

Quantitative and qualitative evidence

Evidence collection methods are usually divided into quantitative approaches (involving numbers) and qualitative approaches (which involves talking to people in a more open way).

Broadly speaking, quantitative research will help you determine whether change has taken place; qualitative research will help you understand why and how. Some of the different methods under each heading are outlined below.

Sources of qualitative evidence	Sources of quantitative evidence
• User comments and informal feedback • Case studies • Interviews • Focus groups • Staff observations/assessment • Stakeholders' views • Comment cards	• Questionnaires completed by service users, staff, volunteers etc. • Attendance logs and other basic data • Information about costs / resources used • Existing data/statistics (e.g. reoffending rates, local crime statistics) • Event/activity evaluations (happy sheets)

Quantitative research

Quantitative research enables you to make more definitive statements about what and how much you have delivered and achieved. The key aspect is to have a consistent way for everyone to record or collect the same information so you can analyse the aggregate data and find out overall what has happened. Broadly speaking there are two types of quantitative data.

- **Hard measures** are factual outputs and outcomes that can be objectively judged as having been achieved or not. Examples would include attendance at an activity, completion of a drug treatment programme or registration with a GP. You can also ask staff / volunteers to record hard measures such as whether people attend on time and assessments of engagement with a project. Nearly all organisations and projects will need to record some hard measures. Some will be collected by the organisation providing the intervention but others may come from external sources.
- **Soft measures** involve asking service users – or others – for their own judgements or to assess their own progress. They include 'internal, less observable things like attitudes and beliefs, as well as self-reported behaviour. Soft measures are usually collected through questionnaires of some sort, but they can also include staff or stakeholders observations and qualitative research.

Baselines and benchmarks

When thinking about your quantitative research needs it's helpful to understand the concept of a **baseline**. This is a measure that you make at the beginning of a project, against which you can then measure progress. Getting a baseline usually means using existing data about the people you work with or collecting information before you start working with them. This is particularly valuable for criminal justice projects which involve working over time to try and help people change; asking the same questions on regular basis can help you keep track of how much – if any – progress is being made.

A **benchmark** is another important concept. It means something to compare your service against. For example, you might compare the reoffending rate for your project users against national reoffending rates[8], or you might compare user satisfaction with one project to other projects.

Helpfully, there are a range of existing tools that you can use or borrow from to conduct quantitative research with service users. The guide below outlines the things to think about and lists the most relevant tools for voluntary organisations working in criminal justice.

http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/UsingOffShelfToolstoMeasureChange.pdf

[8] Although you would need to be very cautious about drawing conclusions from this. Your service users might be very different to the profile of offenders at a regional or national level.

If no existing tool is available then you may have to develop your own questionnaires. The guidance below gives you advice and tips on how to do this, and also discusses how questionnaire data can be analysed.

http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/Questionnaire%20design%20final.pdf

There are also an increasing amount of good software tools that can help you to collect, store, analyse and present data – many of which are free to use for voluntary organisations. The guidance below is a review of some of the different types of platforms available and highlights some examples.

http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/SoftwareToolsForEvidenceCollection.pdf

Economic / Cost Benefit Analysis / Social Return on Investment (SROI)

All evaluations should include information about how much a project has cost, ideally broken down into different elements and showing an estimated cost per user.

If you have good information about outcomes, for example from a comparison group study, you can also start to analyse these costs against benefits (known as cost-benefit analysis). This may help to show you how much impact has been achieved for the money you spent.

However, before you commit to this approach you should consider the following:

- Economic analysis requires being able to value all the outcomes of your work in financial terms — which may be challenging.
- These approaches need to be based on a theory of change and good impact data. Hence all the other approaches described in this document need to be conducted *before* an SROI / cost-benefit analysis should be considered.

For information about economic analysis we recommend the following sources:

Nicholls, J. et al., A Guide to Social Return on Investment (2012), Cabinet Office.

Journey to Impact, A practitioner perspective on measuring social impact

Angier, P., Best practice briefing No. 2:   Measuring social value demystified (2012), Serif Foundation.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research is about talking to people in an open informal way so you can better understand their experiences and perspectives. Because it is a less systematic approach it tends to be regarded as less powerful, but when combined with quantitative research it can provide you with a more complete picture of impact. Qualitative research also gives service users the opportunity to voice their experiences, and to focus on the issues that are particularly important to them.

The guidance below has more information on what qualitative research is, how to conduct and how to analyse it. It also includes a template for a qualitative project design and an illustrative discussion guide.

http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/QualGuidanceFinal.pdf

Is qualitative research the same as case studies?

No. Case studies are a nice way to *illustrate the kind of impact your project might have* but they say nothing about how typical this is or how many people have benefited (and at what cost). Another problem with case studies is that everyone knows they are cherry-picked. In contrast, qualitative research involves speaking to a representative group of service users, going into depth about their experiences and reporting their experiences and feedback honestly.

4) Analysis and reporting

Analysis

You will need to set aside enough time to go through the evidence you have collected and think about what it means. Too often, evidence is collected but then underused. Broadly speaking the aim of analysis is to compare the data collected to your theory of change (a process that is sometimes called contribution analysis[9]). The following are a guide.

The key questions to consider when reviewing your evidence are:

1) Assess congruence: do the results match the theory?
2) Disaggregate results (look at patterns of outcomes among different users).[10]
3) Consider other explanations: could something else apart from your project be causing the change.
4) Ask participants and facilitators for their interpretations of the results
5) Make counterfactual comparisons (try to estimate what would have happened if the course had not been run).
6) Analyse costs/benefits: All evaluations should show how much a project has cost.
7) Consider what has been learned: What would you advise someone else who was delivering a similar intervention?

[9] http://betterevaluation.org/plan/approach/contribution_analysis

[10] It can be particularly valuable to compare; different cohorts (age, gender, ethnicity, type of offending); or variations on your approach and intensity (those who fully engage 100% compared to those who dip in and out); different sequencing of your interventions; and 'dosage' - the difference between those who meet a key worker weekly or monthly. Some real learning can result from this analysis; try to think not only about, 'what works?', but rather 'what works for whom in what circumstances'.

Don't invest in complex analysis software until you area sure you need it. Even complex analysis of quantitative and qualitative data can be done using commonly available spreadsheet software like Microsoft Excel.

Our guide on questionnaire design includes more information on how you should go about analysing quantitative data, while our guide to qualitative research does the same for qualitative.

Reporting

Having run your service, collected and assessed the evidence, you're now ready to write up your findings into a final report.

The key sections of your evaluation report should include:

- **Summary:** A 1-page high level overview telling the story of your evaluation and conclusions.
- **Background:** The context for the service, it's history and what it is trying to achieve
- **Findings:** The main content of your report focusing on the theory of change, detailing the key evidence against each stage and describing how – if at all – your service has made a difference.
- **Conclusions:** Summarises the impact the service has made.
- **Appendices:** Details of your evidence collection methodology, evaluation process and highlighting actual evidence sources.
- **References and resources:** lists any other sources of information you drew upon for your evaluation.

You should always publish your report. Evaluation is about learning and helping other people to learn and we will not achieve this aim if reports stay on peoples' shelves. Depending on who the audience will be you may also want to invest time in making your reporting look polished and professional, although this is less important than getting the content right.

For more information and tips about reporting and presenting data go to:

https://www.thinknpc.org/publications/the-principles-of-good-impact-reporting-2/

http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/ReportWritingGuide.pdf

http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Documents/Quick-tips-English-22-May-2012.pdf

Impartiality

Evaluation is not intended to *justify* projects. Rather it should be an impartial analysis of a project's strengths and weaknesses. Indeed, we see increasing evidence that funders are more interested in whether projects have been properly assessed than what the actual results say. Therefore, if your evaluation is going to be believed you will need to show your readers/stakeholders that you have been impartial in:

- Designing your research (the theory of change will help with this).
- Collecting evidence (this will derive from the quality of your evidence collection and combining a wide range of data/evidence sources).
- Analysing evidence (this comes from the quality and rigour of your write-up, in particular a full description of the methods employed and the inclusion of relevant data in your appendices).

Another important principle is to engage in and be honest about failure. Although it may be difficult, learning from things that have not worked is the best way to improve services. Furthermore if we are not sure if a service will work it is better to implement it on a small scale and learn quickly so that the impact and cost of failure is minimised.

Conclusion

In this document we have aimed to outline the key things you need to know and think about when planning evaluations of your projects.

Hopefully it doesn't seem too daunting. As we said in section 2, start small and try and do a few things well rather than take on too much. Furthermore, it is also likely that you're collecting a lot of the information you need already and your main challenge will be ensuring you are collecting the right information and marshalling it to make a persuasive case about whether or not you are making a difference.

If you have any comments on this guide, if there's anything we've missed or if you have any questions, please email james.noble@thinknpc.org

Appendix: Ethical issues

All research and evaluation has the potential to raise ethical concerns. This is likely to be even more of a concern when working with offenders and their families, as they tend to be vulnerable, with a range of needs and risks. The key question to ask yourself is whether there is any way in which your planned research will have an effect on the lives of participants. This includes how they might interpret a request to take part in the research and the implications of the questions you ask.

There is a range of guidance to help you think through these issues. Section 5 of the document below from MoJ provides a summary of the key issues:

http://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/offenders/psipso/psi2010/psi_2010_41_research_applications.doc

For more general guidance, this document from the Social Research Association is a helpful introduction.

http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ethics03.pdf

A related issue is data protection. Any information you hold about individuals that can identify them is regarded as 'personal data' which is accorded the highest level of security under the data protection act. The Act gives individuals rights, and imposes obligations on those hold personal information to be open about how that information is used. A useful summary of these obligations is here.

http://www.ico.org.uk/for_organisations/data_protection/the_guide/key_definitions

It's likely you are already familiar with these issues through your day-to-day operations, but it's important to consider them in relation to any planned evaluation. Aside from ensuring your information is secure, a useful tip is to anonymise data and store it separately. For example a dataset with survey responses or qualitative data should not include any personal details or other information that could be used to identify individuals. A unique reference number can be used to enable you to link datasets at a later point - if needed.