



Evidence for What? Lessons from the third sector  
26 April 2018  
South Leith Parish Church Halls, Edinburgh

Event summary & actions

# Introduction

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Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS) invited people interested in improving evidence use and in using a wider and richer range of evidence to this roundtable discussion event so that:

- ▶ ESS could share insights from our work in the third sector about evaluation and evidence
- ▶ participants could share their experiences about evidence and its use
- ▶ we could identify collectively what ESS, event participants and others in Scotland could do to improve understanding about evidence and its use.

## **Participating organisations**

Animate Consulting

Carnegie UK Trust

Coalition of Care and Support  
Providers in Scotland (CCPS)

Corra Foundation

Improvement Service

NHS Lanarkshire

Research for Real

Scottish Government

What Works Scotland

Big Lottery Fund

Centre for Research on Families & Relationships

Healthcare Improvement Scotland

Iriss

Outcome Focus

Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE)

The Robertson Trust

**Thanks to the Scottish Government for support with this event**

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# Roundtable discussions

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Table discussions were framed by three interconnected questions:

- **Whose evidence?** We need to give greater value to people's views and experiences and involve them in evaluation.
- **Whose outcomes?** Different people in 'the system' have outcomes (for themselves, their service users, their organisation, particular communities) and need evidence for different purposes (personal planning, improving services managing performance, making funding decisions).
- **Who decides what's good enough?** How do we combine different types of evidence and for what? How do we know if we have enough evidence of the right quality? Who decides?

A [discussion stimulus paper](#) was sent out in advance that identified some of the challenges related to each question. On the day we wanted to (a) check out with people if ESS thinking was going in the right direction and (b) hear about participants' experiences of engaging with these aspects of evidence production, collection and use.

This report summarises some key points from the day. We've identified discussion questions to encourage wider debate and you can find these at the end of each section.

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# Why do we care about evidence?

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These thoughts came from icebreaker conversations at the start of the event.

- ▶ Make good decisions & inform our choices
- ▶ Use money wisely- so it has the greatest impact
- ▶ Have clarity, transparency & accountability about what drives decisions, e.g. ethics
- ▶ Develop understanding of different types of evidence
- ▶ So that evidence is better used (especially from the third sector)
- ▶ So we can support listening and informed discussion.

# Whose evidence?

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## What counts?

- ▶ Practitioners are often in the best position to hear the voices of service users and have a key role to play in sharing what they hear. Practitioner reflections and observations are also evidence.
- ▶ Service providers and commissioners need to agree about the type/s of evidence that is valued or important.
- ▶ Evidence should have a flexible and context-relevant definition that is agreed by those who are involved in producing or using it.
- ▶ Evidence gathered by an individual to develop their practice can also be evidence useful for their organisation.

## Using evidence

- ▶ The purpose for using evidence is not always clear- it should be.
- ▶ Evidence used for reporting and evidence used for practice development is sometimes different. That may be OK.
- ▶ The uptake or use of evidence can often depend on how well it is communicated rather than the 'strength' of it.
- ▶ It's OK to take risks to try out new approaches even though there is a limited evidence base to refer to- but be sure to evaluate!
- ▶ Language is a barrier. There was debate if we should change the language **or** skill up practitioners to understand expert language and concepts.
- ▶ It takes skill to translate the language of evidence and outcomes when working with or consulting service users and local people.

# Whose evidence?

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## Gathering & sharing evidence

- ▶ Evidence should be gathered with a clear purpose.
- ▶ There should be a discussion with evidence users or decision makers about how much evidence is reasonable and appropriate.
- ▶ It is important to record any changes in the way we do things. This evidence lets us know how we achieve outcomes.
- ▶ Organisations have a fear of the impact on their funding if they report/provide evidence about what didn't work. There needs to be a culture change to value reflection and continuous improvement.

## Analysis

It is important to:

- ▶ analyse as you go along (e.g. after collecting stories- what do they tell us?)
- ▶ embed reflection and analysis into practice- reflections on practice are a form of evidence
- ▶ make sure you have a way of sharing understanding of what evidence means. Be transparent about different views and acknowledge where consensus can't be reached.

# Whose evidence? Discussion questions

1. Should we try to create a common language of evidence or adapt how we talk about evidence to different audiences?
2. How can we combine and make better use of different types of evidence?
3. What are your processes for gathering & producing evidence? Are they timely, transparent, collaborative?
4. How do we create a climate in which we can confidently share and learn about what doesn't work well?
5. Funders/commissioners: How do you use evidence to inform learning **and** to inform funding decisions?

# Whose outcomes?

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## Holding outcomes lightly

- ▶ High level outcomes are sometimes so broad they are meaningless. “Outcomes need to be meaningful, or at least not meaningless”.
- ▶ Remember that service level outcomes are not the same as strategic level or personal outcomes.
- ▶ Most people liked the idea of holding outcomes lightly so that activity and outcomes can be personalised to individual, project or community...

### **but**

- ▶ ...don't stop thinking about outcomes, they provide a shared sense of what you are trying to achieve and a basis for accountability.

## Outcomes are not targets

- ▶ “Outcomes are needed to help us to have an articulated shared purpose in what we are doing”.
- ▶ If we monitor too closely against activity we might stop organisations from responding flexibly and creatively to achieve their outcomes. Let's not go back to activity measurement.
- ▶ Outcomes are not targets. This means we need to use other criteria for managing performance.

# Whose outcomes?

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## Outcomes are related

- ▶ Everyone in the system has outcomes that relate directly to them.
- ▶ Practitioners support service users to achieve their outcomes.
- ▶ Relationships are important, you can't speak about service user outcomes without understanding the practitioner's role and their experiences.
- ▶ It's important to work with people to help translate the outcomes set or to illustrate how their work contributes to a higher level outcome achievement.
- ▶ Shared ownership of evidence: so that evidence-gathering makes sense we need to understand how outcomes at/for different levels fit with, or contribute to, the outcomes at other levels.

## Tracking the journey

- ▶ A logic model allows you to make links between different levels of outcome. It shows what's within your control and the contribution that different agencies/projects make to a strategic outcome **but...**
- ▶ logic models capture work as imagined, not as the work is done in reality, and often an outcome focus creates an environment that doesn't encourage the 'messy' real story of work. **So...**
- ▶ it's important to track the journey of how you achieve your outcomes and any changes in your plan, not just the end impact **and...**
- ▶ be clear about what assumptions were behind the logic model. It is valuable to test and evaluate these assumptions.

# Whose outcomes? Discussion questions

1. How could you try to 'hold outcomes lightly'?
2. If outcomes are not targets, then what are your criteria for managing performance?
3. How do you link outcomes at different levels (e.g. personal, service, strategic, national) to create a shared purpose?
4. How do we make evidence work at different levels? (e.g. local, project, programme, policy, national)
5. How can you involve people (e.g. service users) more in the development of outcomes?



# Who decides what's good enough?

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## Hierarchies of evidence

- ▶ Is there a hierarchy of evidence – yes. Should there be – no! Good evidence is useful evidence.
- ▶ Our evidence models haven't caught up with new ways of thinking. For example, the legal system uses the term 'evidence' to mean 'what people say' (stories) in court.

## No absolute standards but quality standards

- ▶ Not all evidence is of equal quality.
- ▶ We need quality criteria but ditch the concept of absolute 'rigour'.
- ▶ We need a system to decide if evidence is good enough for the specific context. The question you want to answer determines the evidence you need.

## Who decides?

- ▶ Organisations don't make decisions, people do- we all decide all the time!
- ▶ We need to agree the role of experts in filtering evidence.
- ▶ There's a hierarchy of **researchers!** With social researchers at the bottom?
- ▶ The person with decision-making power needs to understand evidence complexity.
- ▶ It is often unclear who decides what **isn't** good enough evidence- it should be clear who the decision makers are.

# Who decides what's good enough?

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## Decision making

- ▶ We bring our own knowledge – or lack of it – to bear in decision making.
- ▶ We need better understanding about what decisions we think we are making with evidence.
- ▶ We need conversations at the start to agree how outcomes are best evidenced and what outcomes to collect evidence on.
- ▶ What's the consequence of the decision?
- ▶ Evidence should help us do the right thing – not do the wrong thing better.
- ▶ We need to grow the research-minded thoughtful practitioner.

## Transferability of evidence

- ▶ Tells us how this works here in this context - not how it works everywhere
- ▶ It's not that 'nothing transfers' but we need to keep learning our way through complexity.

# Who decides? Discussion questions

1. What factors do you take into account when deciding what counts as 'good enough' evidence?
2. Who decides what **isn't** good enough?
3. Does your organisation use an evidence quality framework? For example:
  - ▶ TREBL: (see KTN publication Evidence from Elsewhere p. 26. Adapted from Levitt et al, 2010) <https://bit.ly/2yNbG3X>
  - ▶ Alliance for Useful Evidence: Evidence Transparency Framework <https://bit.ly/2tywUxt>
  - ▶ Bond: NGO evidence quality assessment framework: <https://bit.ly/2rUIr6w>



# Actions for ESS

In response to actions suggested by event participants, Evaluation Support Scotland will start work on the following items in 2018. We intend to have some outputs ready to share later in the year and further work will be built into our 2019-23 strategic plan.

1. Promote this short paper to share learning from the Evidence for What event more widely.
2. Create a 'stats & stories' resource for the third sector as a reference guide for blending quantitative and qualitative evidence (we will produce a first draft version of the resource then run an event to test it out with third sector practitioners).
3. Create a 'key messages' document around 'stats & stories' for funders, commissioners and policy-makers.
4. Develop material on 'holding outcomes lightly'.
5. Develop material for the third sector on 'how do I know if my evidence is good enough quality?' (in doing so we'll scope and refer to existing evidence frameworks).

