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LIVING IT

CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND JUSTICE

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BEYOND RECONVICTIONS

Catherine Bisset on developing an approach to evaluating interventions to reduce reoffending

FACED with a number of challenges relating to measuring the impact of interventions on complex outcomes, Justice analysts in the Scottish Government have developed a 4-step approach to evaluating criminal justice interventions based on embedding evidence-informed practice and using logic models.

Reducing reoffending

Reducing reoffending in adults isn't easy. The research evidence tells us that long lasting social change will only be achieved by a collaborative effort by justice agencies, holistic specialist interventions, universal services and supportive communities who are prepared to invest in sustained, high quality support for people who offend. It may take years to see a real and lasting change to society: 'invest now, save later' is the recurring theme that runs though the international literature on reducing crime and reoffending.

On the bright side, one thing is clear: there are many people and organisations in Scotland determined to make a difference. Despite the cynicism of the national press and considerable doubts by hard-liners about the effectiveness of rehabilitation, there are countless individuals and organisations in Scotland who are trying to change lives, even when faced with shrinking budgets. Our service landscape is peppered with a proliferation of small voluntary organisations, public sector bodies, partnerships and individuals who work with people with complex needs. There are almost as many funding organisations who need to know if their social investments have been worthwhile.

Evaluation must have a purpose

If we want to improve services and increase accountability in a world of ever decreasing budgets, funders need to base their decisions on robust evaluations that can discriminate between a strong and a poor service. To achieve this, we need a way of evaluating services that fits Scotland's service landscape, is rigorous, transparent, doable and most of all *useful* for those who are delivering and investing in services. Let's face it, if evaluation isn't seen to improve what people do, it's little more than a pointless paper exercise.

The problem with conviction rates as a measure of performance

For a long time now, we've used conviction rates as a proxy for reoffending. It's not surprising, then, to discover that even the tiniest of services still feel under considerable pressure to 'prove' they have reduced conviction rates (sometimes years after users have left the service); and if they have, how much money they've saved in real terms, not least because funders ask them to.

But here's the problem. If changing the behaviour of people who offend is hard, then measuring whether you've done it is arguably even harder. This isn't great news, but it's not surprising to those who work in this field.

As most researchers and statisticians know, working out if a policy, service or intervention has made an impact on long term outcomes is plagued with technical problems such as statistical significance, selection bias, and lack of robust control groups. This means that even if an intervention *appears* to have had an impact on reoffending, this may or may not be the case. Often interventions bemoan the lack of time to collect long term convictions data for their users but it's often the absence of a large comparison group and appropriate statistical analysis which hinders impact analysis.

Is it fundamentally wrong to ask a single service or intervention to 'prove' they have reduced reoffending?

Measure contribution not attribution?

While analysts were grappling with how we address these challenges, a more fundamental principle occurred to us. Is it fundamentally wrong to ask a single service or intervention to 'prove' they have reduced reoffending? After all didn't it state in the first paragraph of this article that we'll only make a long term difference to complex outcomes if we work together using multi-level interventions? For example, should a throughcare or mentoring service be penalised for not reducing reoffending when another key service drops the ball beyond its control? If some things that are important to reducing reoffending are out of our hands, then shouldn't we be asking how individual services are *contributing* to reducing reoffending rather than holding them each to account for actually reducing reoffending?

The four-step approach

So what do we do about all this? Justice analysts had to discover another way of measuring relative contribution of a service to achieving longer term outcomes, in this case reducing reoffending. The most worthwhile aspect of this journey has been speaking to service providers who highlighted very real challenges to evaluating their services in practice.

With all this in mind, we came up with a four-step approach to evaluation which is has now been published in an accessible form (PowerPoint) and is available on the Scottish Government website. The guidance includes a range of subject-relevant resources, example logic models, a summary of the international literature on 'what works' to reduce reoffending and desistance, and worked examples of a data collection framework and an evaluation report structure.

These are the four key steps:

STEP 1: Demonstrate that quality is built into the design from the start.

Understand what the wider evidence-base says 'works' to reduce reoffending and encourage desistance from crime. Show clearly and specifically how the evidence has informed the outcomes and been embedded it into the content of the service. Evidence-based services are more likely to be effective than services not grounded in evidence, so using the evidence should improve the quality of services from the outset. Funders as well as interventions should know what the evidence base says.

STEP 2: How will the service contribute to long term outcomes?

Show explicitly how your service's activities will contribute to short, medium and long term outcomes using a graphic called a logic model. Logic models may sound dull, but they are attractive because we use them every day. If you've ever asked yourself 'what am I trying to do, how am going to do it and have I succeeded', you are using a logic model.

STEP 3: Use the logic model as a guide to collect data.

This is often the most challenging step. Collecting logic model data is arduous, but it's worth investing in. Once you have the systems in place, they should never have to be radically changed and services can produce comprehensive information about their users' journey at any point.

STEP 4: Evaluate the service based on the logic model

Use the data (both quantitative and qualitative) you have collected to answer key logic model questions. Was there enough money to set up the activities? Were activities delivered as intended? How many users achieved outcomes /made progress?

Is it useful?

The approach seems to have passed the 'usefulness' test to some degree. Steps 1 and 2 have already been used as criteria by funders to strengthen how they commission services and for their own strategic planning. Word on the street also suggests that following the staged logic model allows funders to monitor and review how services are developing which encourages more collaboration between funder and service provider. Another benefit is that the complexity of the 4-steps can be adjusted proportionately depending on the size and cost of the service. This is important for smaller services with limited resources.

The provision of evidence summaries seems to have promoted a shared understanding of the evidence-base, debunking some widely-held myths and assumptions, and many service providers have found logic modelling especially useful for designing outcome-focused services. Logic models have given service providers the flexibility to try and achieve a wider range of intermediate outcomes that are associated with desistance from crime, but are more closely related to service goals than reducing reoffending, for example, a reduction in drug use or better family relationships.

Next steps towards implementation

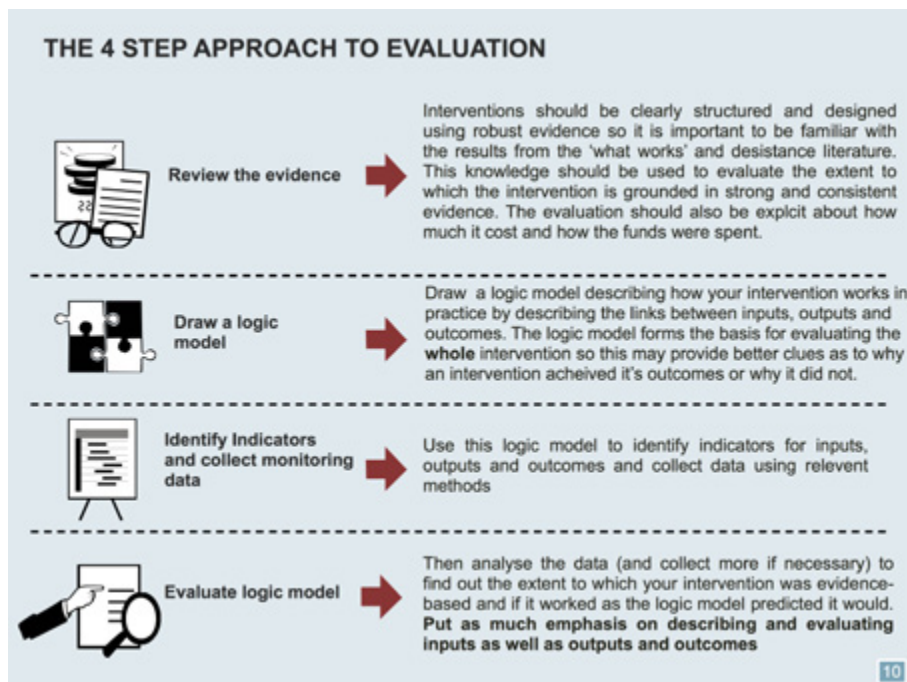
There are still issues to iron out of course, especially with data collection. Many interventions need to increase capacity and skills and adapt data capture systems. These must be addressed so service providers and research contractors feel confident to conduct this type of evaluation.

Honesty and trust are other thorny issues, and are often the big white elephant in the room. If evaluations are to improve services, funders and service providers must be able to openly discuss problems as well as successes so they can work together to make services better. Although reducing reoffending at a national level requires us to work together, the fiercely competitive procurement market may be a barrier to success which may suggest that commissioning 'cooperation' via partnerships would be a model that better fits the evidence of what promotes desistance. It is also crucial to create a climate where funders and services see less than perfect evaluation results as an opportunity to work collaboratively to make services more effective, and this may be the real challenge.

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The Reducing Reoffending Evaluation Pack can be downloaded from:

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Justice/justicestrategy/programmes/reducing-reoffending2/Research>



UK Justice Policy Review:

Volume 2

6 May 2011 to 5 May 2012

UK Justice Policy Review:

Volume 3

6 May 2012 to 5 May 2013

By Richard Garside, Arianna Silvestri
and Helen Mills

UK Justice Policy Review:

Volume 1

6 May 2010 to 5 May 2011

By Richard Garside and Helen Mills

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