

Evaluation of Homelessness Prevention Innovation Fund Projects

Interim Good Practice Guidance

January 2008

Recent research on homelessness prevention activities in Scotland showed that there is substantial scope for improved practice in the monitoring and evaluation of homelessness prevention activities¹. Too little attention is paid to the monitoring and evaluation of the work that is done to prevent homelessness and there is a strong need for the evaluation of effectiveness.

This interim good practice guidance sets out some of the early lessons from the eight Homelessness Prevention Innovation (HPI) Fund projects. It shares the emerging findings about how to evaluate homelessness prevention. It is based on the views of the HPIF projects and is informed by the 'promising practices' emerging from the local and national evaluation activities to date, including an Exchange Event in October 2007. It is intended to be shared more widely and tested out before the evaluation is completed in the summer of 2008, when it is expected to issue further guidance.

Key messages

- The prevention of homelessness doesn't happen in isolation from other projects; an exclusive focus on homelessness may not yield the most efficient results, rather a holistic or systemic approach is needed.
- Resistance to evaluation is pervasive, but evaluation need not be viewed as a threat if it is approached as a built-in way of getting feedback, improving practice and ultimately outcomes for service users.
- There is a need for a focus on *outcomes*, not outputs and to value both hard and soft outcomes.
- The simple and incidental things or stories of how things are working are important and can tell you as much as any structured framework; both are valuable.
- Even if a project is on a small scale it is still important to evaluate. After all if something works well and doesn't cost a great deal, you will wish to continue and others may wish to adopt a similar approach.

¹ *Evaluation of Homelessness Prevention Activities in Scotland*, Scottish Executive, Social Research, 2007

Don't evaluate in isolation

Many homelessness prevention projects are based on multi-agency working but too often partners are not included in early discussions about how to evaluate the work.

Practice points

- √ Identify the relevant partners in the evaluation of the initiative or project.
- √ Include front line staff in this process.
- √ Meet early in the life of the project.
- √ Together, consider your perspectives about what would be happening if the project is successful.
- √ Consider whether some of the project clients should be involved in this process. Remember they may have different views of 'success'.
- √ Discuss the following questions with your partners.

Questions to help design an evaluation

1. Imagine our project is successful – what is happening?
2. Might others have different views of 'success'? e.g. Other stakeholders?
Service users?
3. a) What's the link between our success and the prevention of homelessness?
b) What else may we have achieved?
4. If you can't demonstrate clearly that you have prevented homelessness, what sort of evidence will convince us that we are at least on the right track?
5. For our evaluation to be useful should it be a process or an event?
6. How can we balance 'lightness of touch' with generating learning for ourselves and others?
7. Looking beyond the project, what else do we need to keep an eye on to help us make sense of our specific impact?

Think carefully about what success looks like

Evaluating an initiative that aims to prevent homelessness brings real challenges. Some projects are providing a *crisis response*, where the threat of homelessness is imminent whilst others are more *precautionary*, aiming to lessen the risk of future homelessness. It may be impossible to *prove* that your intervention has been responsible for preventing homelessness presentations. Indeed in some cases, there may be more presentations as a result. Definitive attribution of outcomes to specific interventions is probably an unattainable goal; indeed ‘proof’ of this nature may not be the point. A multi-agency approach to evaluation will help people to recognise the complexity of the context in which projects are working and enable better understanding of the shared contributions of a variety of partners to the ultimate outcomes.

Practice points

- √ Consider developing a ‘theory of change’ for your project, with all relevant stakeholders. This means that together you need to spell out your assumptions about typical pathways or links between certain activities, behaviours and the risk of homelessness.
- √ Produce a timeline; spell out in advance what you expect to see happening, at what stage in the life of the project, so that you will know whether the project is going in the right direction towards intended outcomes and how far it has travelled.
- √ Produce an ‘outcome map’ which shows the links between your inputs, activities (outputs) and intended outcomes.
- √ Don’t be over ambitious in terms of the intended outcomes that you claim you can achieve, especially in a short time.

Measure your outcomes

Many of the HPIF projects are actually working to build resilience to crisis, prevent crises or reduce the chaotic nature of homelessness. Often projects are working with clients to equip them with the skills, knowledge, confidence and so on that will help them to deal better with future crisis in their lives. These varied objectives mean that notionally ‘objective’ direct measures of success in terms of a reduction in homelessness presentations may not be appropriate. An outcome map may show that there are primary and secondary outcomes; many projects are actually aiming to develop more effective agency systems and processes to ensure greater efficiency and enhance partnership working. In such cases, outcomes for service users or potential homelessness people are *secondary* and such projects need to think about how to measure primary organisational outcomes.

Practice points

- √ Decide what measures of success you will use and develop appropriate indirect or interim success factors or outcome measures.
- √ Distinguish between primary and secondary outcomes.
- √ Make sure your measures actually reflect your intended outcomes; it may be appropriate to use ‘proxy’ measures of the success of homelessness prevention.
- √ Make sure these measures are meaningful for clients, staff, managers and commissioners by checking them out with them.

- √ Don't try to measure everything: instead, pick a basket of indicators that covers the range and depth of the type of work you are doing and allows for any required comparisons across projects.

Value both soft and hard outcomes

Soft outcomes are those more intangible aspects of the work such as the development of social skills, confidence, motivation, health awareness and the ability to exercise good judgements.

There is sometimes resistance to spelling out the assumed links between project activities and the prevention of homelessness; this may be due to fear that this will not be considered valid by funders. Yet, indicators of softer outcomes related to confidence, participation, growing networks, and personal resilience to crisis and so on, may stand very well as 'proxies' or parallel indicators. Soft outcomes are no less valid than their hard more tangible counterparts; indeed a failure to achieve both hard and soft outcomes, may undermine any achievement of hard outcomes such as maintaining the person in their existing home.

Practice points

- √ Identify key hard and soft outcomes that work together.
- √ Make the capture of evidence about soft outcomes an integral part of your evaluation.
- √ A good principle for the capture of soft outcomes is to ask service users or other target group to assess their own starting point and progress towards outcomes.
- √ Sometimes you don't have a baseline. This might be because you are not working with a fixed and known client group on a 'casework' basis (for example, if you're issuing an information resource) so that the target group is a continuing changing 'flow' rather than a stock of people. In these circumstances, think carefully about *when* it is appropriate to measure success.
- √ It may make more sense to evaluate more *formatively* with all the agencies involved and to ask 'how is our intervention *working?*' rather than set a future date at which an overall *summative* assessment is made as to whether the intervention has 'worked'.
- √ If you do have a known client group, but haven't collected baseline data, it's still possible to ask people to assess their own changes retrospectively.
- √ Remember that 'not everything that counts can be counted'. Any assessment of the soft outcomes will need *qualitative* feedback from agency staff and service users themselves. This need not be onerous or expensive; encouraging more reflective practice is a good way of evaluating intangibles.
- √ Be open to a variety of qualitative approaches to gather feedback. Don't dismiss stories or accounts from staff; used appropriately they can provide valuable information about particular experience which would be overlooked in quantitative approaches.

Be formative, flexible and appreciative

Some of the most useful learning may arise from a more formative approach to evaluation; an on-going, light touch process that only collects data that is meaningful and which is useful for action.

As one of the HPIF projects said *'I think in another sphere that would just be referred to as a continuous improvement and learning approach and I think we ought to be doing that.'*

This guidance implies that the evaluation process is likely to be more positive and useful if it is well planned in advance. This is true, but you will also need to stay alert for incidents, stories or other accounts from clients, staff and partners which illustrate how things are working. This will help to develop a fuller understanding of other data and also pick up on unanticipated outcomes or spin offs.

Practice points

- √ Encourage stakeholders to be more evaluation minded; encourage people to share accounts or stories of how things are working – or not.
- √ Don't overlook the positive accounts so that you will know what you are doing right (and keep doing it).
- √ Use evaluation as a chance to provide feedback to staff, give credit for success and motivate staff.
- √ Stay flexible - stick to the plan if it makes sense to do so but not so rigidly that you miss opportunities or unanticipated outcomes or spin-offs.
- √ Work backwards not forwards; work out critical milestones when it would be useful to have some feedback – both as the project is unfolding and towards the end.

Involve clients in a real not tokenistic way

The HPIF projects want to be inclusive, but not tokenistic; *'asking questions is not participation'*. Asking service users to help you to consider *what the questions should be* is much more inclusive evaluation practice. There is no template to guide the approach to this issue and it needs to be considered in the specific context and client group with which you are concerned. Whilst at the Exchange Event it was said that *'people will talk to their peers'*, so far no projects have tried a peer-led evaluation.

- √ Include a service user perspective in the planning of the evaluation; this might include their views about your theory of change and what success would look like from their perspective.
- √ Recognise the diversity amongst service users and ensure that the design and execution of the evaluation minimises barriers to participation.
- √ Ethical conduct is a particular concern amongst more vulnerable service users. Particular reassurance will need to be given to some service users about their participation in evaluation activities and the approach may need to enable people to be accompanied by a friend, support worker or advocate.
- √ Don't use methods to collect data that you know from experience are unlikely to get a good response rate. Think more creatively about what approaches will engage people, rather than always issuing questionnaires or having focus groups.

Further research, guidance and resources

Evaluation Support Scotland

Practical support and access to on-line evaluation resources and tools.

www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk

Charities Evaluation Service

Information and publications on all aspects of monitoring and evaluation, including an on-line resource guide.

www.ces-vol.org.uk

Homeless Outcomes (London Housing Federation)

A resource for homelessness agencies taking an outcomes approach to their work, including guidance on using the Outcomes Star to measure change when working with vulnerable service users.

www.homelessoutcomes.org.uk

Managing Outcomes A Guide for Homelessness Organisations

Sara Burns and Sally Cupitt. Free to download from www.ces-vol.org.uk

How to gather views on service quality - guidance for social landlords

Cathy Sharp and Sheena Murdoch. This provides guidance on methods which can be used to obtain service user feedback, of relevance to a wider range of public and voluntary services. Free to download from www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk

Homelessness Prevention 2007, Shelter Scotland, March 2007

This reports on current thinking about homelessness prevention. It is aimed at national and local policy makers and at practitioners who want to develop their own range of services. Free to download www.shelter.org.uk

Evaluation of Homelessness Prevention Activities in Scotland, Hal Pawson et al Scottish Government, March 2007 An evaluation of homelessness prevention activities of local authorities and partner agencies in Scotland. Free to download

www.scotland.gov.uk

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