

Charities and evidence

- Kerry McCarthy

I am going to start by describing what I mean by the term 'evidence'. Then I will describe how evidence can be useful to charities. Thirdly, I will consider what I think are important principles for generating and using an evidence base...and finally I will mention some things you might want to consider when conducting or commissioning research. I am not going to describe particular methodologies in detail.

So - What do I mean by evidence?

The dictionary definition of evidence is very broad - 'a thing or things helpful in forming a conclusion or judgement'.

Some types of evidence that help people form a conclusion about a charity include anecdotes, impressions from visits to services and the stories of service users and images in the media. These are all, and will undoubtedly remain, powerful influences on how charities are perceived.

Evidence from evaluation or monitoring data provides an additional source of information to support or question these conclusions and is based on aggregated information, rather than individual stories.

How is this kind of evidence useful to charities?

Donors and commissioners increasingly look for an evidence base on 'effectiveness', the overall impact of a charity or a charity's service, when deciding how to allocate funds. I've just written a chapter on impact evaluation for the new Philanthropy UK 'Guide to Giving', which reflects this growing interest in 'intelligent' or 'evidence informed giving', this is not a subject they have included in previous editions of the publication.

Evidence may also be useful for more general lobbying purposes, for example to put the case to government on how or why a particular issue should be addressed. An example of this is an evidence review we conducted for a group of charitable foundations who fund projects which work with offenders.

We reviewed all available high quality research on the effectiveness of prison and alternatives to prison and compared the value for money they offered. By using the most rigorous methodology and high quality data the findings had credibility with senior government figures, including the Home Affairs Select Committee. The evidence was a door opener for the charities who were trying to influence key individuals on criminal justice policy.

Evidence of effective working can also contribute to the general sense of public 'trust' in charities, something which was highlighted in the recent Charity Commission report on trust.

For charities themselves evidence can inform internal learning and development. Evidence on the aggregated impact of a charity can challenge misconceptions about effectiveness that often come when people are very passionate about their work. Evidence on how a charity operates – the processes and structures – can help identify which are the core components to making a service work.

Last but by no means least, evidence is important for the end beneficiaries that charities are seeking to help. Checking the impact of your work ensures that those using a charity's service are benefiting, or at the very least are not having their situation made worse.

Evidence from evaluation or monitoring data can perhaps be most useful to a charity when it helps answer the following questions about a charity's mission:

Should it work? Can it work? Does it work? Is it worth it?

I will explain what I mean by each question:

Should it work?

How does the charity think the way they are working will lead to the intended benefits? The logic model behind the way a charity goes about its business.

Can it work?

Does the charity have the necessary things in place to turn the logic into a reality?

Data could include the services offered and how they are staffed, the number of people who use them and the sequence of different parts of the service.

Does it work?

What information is available on the outcomes from the work of the charity – not just the inputs or outputs but the impact they are having. This can be the tricky and resource intensive bit.

The final question...

Is it worth it?

Does the evidence help understand the costs of delivery and can this be combined with information on the costs saved as a result of the delivery – evidence on value for money. Even without effectiveness data, you can use evidence on the cost of delivering your service to demonstrate what kind of impact your charity would need to have in order to provide value for money, the break even point.

But even evidence on just the first question – should it work – through a clear logic model can provide reassurance that the charity knows where it is heading and how it is intending to get there.

Key principles of research

There are some principles which should always be borne in mind when devising ways to answer these questions.

Evidence needs to be **useful** to the charity, **credible** to external audiences and **accessible** in cost, method and language. There needs to be:

Passion for improvement: evidence can identify that things do not work and why, thereby providing useful information to improve services or funding decisions. But these can be difficult messages to hear. When generating evidence it is important to secure the support of all stakeholders for a process which is not about identifying failure but about finding ways to improve the charity they are involved with.

And a final principle to think about when collecting evidence is:

Adding value: for example by building on existing evidence where possible and ensuring that new evidence includes the information needed for results to inform practical decisions. For example, it is not enough to know that something is effective if you do not provide the detail on processes and structures to allow it to be properly replicated somewhere else.

Collaboration between charities to develop evidence on a particular area is another way to add value. It can ensure that efforts are not duplicated and, where appropriate, a larger data set is available to provide better quality results.

Conclusion

Finally I am going to mention some questions to consider when commissioning research or planning what data to collect:

- What do you want to know about, for what purpose and for what audience?
- What evidence already exists?
- Who else wants to know about this, can you work together?
- What resources are available?
- When do we need to have results by?
- What support do you need?
- What data is available?

The answers to these questions will allow for clearer expectations on what will be possible from the work.

It is really important to be clear about what you are trying to get from research or data collection before you commission or begin the work yourselves. It is also important to be open to an assessment of whether it will be possible to meet your expectations – evidence is only as good as the data available - there is no magic research fairy dust that can make up for a lack of good quality data to work with.