

Developing Evidence Based Practice in Voluntary Sector Organisations: The Barnardo's Experience

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Barnardo's is committed to delivering good outcomes for children and young people and has been promoting an evidence-based approach to children's services since the mid-1990s¹. Widely perceived as a leader in producing 'what works' evidence, the challenge for Barnardo's is to apply this evidence in practice in our services.

Why does evidence matter?

Throughout history, despite the best of intentions, some interventions have made people sicker, unhappier and poorer, or at the very least have done less good than intended.² There is a view that simply 'meaning well' does not inevitably result in 'doing good'³. For example, scared straight programmes, which introduce young offenders or those at risk of offending to prison inmates based on the theory that exposure to prison life will deter them from future crime, are politically popular and widely used in the United States. Yet a substantial review of the evidence, which combined results of the seven available randomised studies of scared-straight, concluded that such programmes are not only harmful to participants, but may also increase delinquency, relative to doing nothing. See Box 1.

Box 1: Scared Straight Programmes

"We conclude that programmes like Scared Straight are likely to have a harmful effect and increase delinquency relative to doing nothing at all to the same youths. Given these results, agencies that permit such programmes must rigorously evaluate them not only to ensure they are doing what they purport to do (prevent crime) but at the very least do not cause more harm than good." ⁴Petrosino et al, 2002

Background

Barnardo's commitment to bring about, and demonstrate, real change (i.e. positive outcomes for service users) is achieved through:

- Understanding service users needs and developing services based on evidence of effectiveness (i.e. 'what works')
- Demonstrating achievement of change and generating our own evidence of outcomes for service users through outcome focused evaluation

We seek to demonstrate not just 'what we do' but also 'why we do what we do'.

Evidence-based practice: What experience and resources do we have?

Barnardo's has invested in evidence-based practice (EBP) over a number of years and as a result has considerable experience and expertise in this area. Specific resources, expertise and staffing which have contributed to this work are outlined in Box 2 below. In Scotland, the Research and Development team have delivered training on setting and evaluating outcomes to those responsible for designing and delivering Barnardo's services. Box 3 outlines this work.

Box 2: Evidence Based Practice: Barnardo's Experience and Resources

- Devising and delivering EBP training for a range of audiences internally and externally (in both adult and children's services, students to senior managers)
- Learning from the 'What Works for Children?' project – a joint research implementation initiative with City University and the University of York
- Developing team approaches to EBP within some Barnardo's services
- History of good links with academic institutions and colleagues and other 'research use' organisations

Resources

- **The Evidence Guide**⁵, a modular training pack aimed at equipping staff with the skills and knowledge required for evidence-based practice including outcome focussed evaluation.
- **The Short Guide to Outcomes** provides a framework for developing and setting measurable outcomes for Children's Services.
- **The 'What Works' series.** 17 titles providing summaries of evidence on different practice areas.
- **The Evidence Request Service** provides summarised accessible overviews of evidence in response to practitioner's questions.
- **Intranet and electronic file sharing system (livelink)** enabling access to research and evaluation related resources
- Barnardo's **Library** accessible to all staff via the intranet
- **Access to the internet** in all services
- A network of **Communities of Practice** – groups of practitioners working on similar practice issues
- **Evaluations of services** and themed evaluations across services (e.g. sexual exploitation)
- A UK wide **Policy & Research Unit** (PRU)
- A dedicated **Development Officer** post for evidence-based practice

Box 3: Outcomes training in Scotland

Barnardo's Scotland Research and Development team have delivered outcomes training to our 7 Assistant Directors (ADs) and 60 Children's Service Managers (CSMs). The training was designed to encourage consistency around outcomes, evaluation and EBP and enabled us to introduce the Short Guide to Outcomes and the Evidence Guide in Scotland. The training covered the following:

- Why evaluate?
- What are outcomes?
- Why are outcomes important?
- Setting outcomes for your service
- Tracking progress towards these outcomes

Feedback and learning from the training

- Participants were pleased to be given the opportunity to devote focused time and energy to this work; they appreciated being able to share ideas and issues with colleagues facing similar dilemmas and felt that it was useful for ADs and CSMs to do the training together
- Participants felt the training achieved a good balance, avoiding over simplicity but not being too complex; some felt the difference between inputs, outputs and outcomes was explained well but others were confused about terms and pointed out that the terminology did not always fit with funders' language
- It was acknowledged that setting outcomes is a difficult process; some participants felt that one days training was not enough and that more support was needed
- Demonstrating effectiveness can be very difficult; services need to ensure they are not over ambitious and to recognise that outcomes can take a long time to achieve.

The way forward? Developing a Strategy for EBP

A proposed strategy for the development of EBP which seeks to bring together a coherent approach and maximise the expertise and resources available is currently being devised. The strategy identifies 3 key areas for development:

1. The development of organisational commitment to and ownership of evidence-based practice

Organisational commitment is essential to the adoption of evidence based approaches. The proposed strategy outlines a number of proposed actions for Senior Management to encourage, support and sustain evidence based approaches which include:

- Provide staff with time and opportunities to develop critical thinking
- Build discussion of research into supervision and appraisal processes
- Build research competencies into job descriptions
- Maintain and build strategic links with research institutions
- Build evidence into service planning and review processes
- Support effective evaluation of outcomes of practice

2. The increased use of evidence-based approaches amongst staff

A key tool in attempting to increase the use of evidence-based approaches amongst staff has been the delivery of appropriate training. Whilst training in isolation will not necessarily achieve sustainable change it can be a key factor in enabling practitioners. The Evidence Guide (see box 4) seeks to equip practitioners with the knowledge and skills required to become more evidence based. This includes the ability to locate, appraise, adapt and apply evidence, to evaluate their practice and promote critical thinking about their work and encourage inquisitiveness about research evidence. The Evidence Guide has been developed and piloted with staff both internally and externally and is now being rolled out throughout the organisation.

Box 4: The Evidence Guide

SKILL AREA	KEY QUESTIONS	MODULE?
BACKGROUND TO EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE	Why use research evidence? What are the benefits of using research in practice?	MODULE 1 Using research evidence in practice: an introduction
FINDING RESEARCH EVIDENCE	Can we find the research evidence we need? Are we looking in the right places?	MODULE 2 Locating research evidence in five steps
ASSESSING RESEARCH EVIDENCE	Is the research evidence reliable and high quality? Is it relevant and applicable?	MODULE 3 Appraising and reviewing research evidence
MAINTAINING AN EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH: ADAPTING & ACTING ON EVIDENCE	Do we have the skills, structures, processes and culture to promote and use research evidence in decision-making? Can we present the evidence in a useful format combining recommendations, conclusions and key issues?	MODULE 4 Adapting and Applying Evidence: Issues for individual practitioners and managers

EVALUATING OUTCOMES OF PRACTICE	How do we know whether service objectives have been achieved? Can we assess the outcomes for people who use our service? How do we learn from and share good practice?	MODULE 5 Outcome-focused evaluation
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Feedback from participants attending training linked to the Evidence Guide highlights some of the benefits gained from such input (see Box 5).

Box 5: Evidence Guide Training: What did participants learn?

“Innovative ways of communicating research findings.”
“The benefits of linking research and practice and strategic development.”
“Question why we are still doing some things in the same way!”
“Research should be seen as ‘real’ work and should be planned into work schedule.”
“Practical experience of locating research online, and confidence!”
“There’s loads out there but you need to know where to look – Google is not always helpful!”
“I can look at statistics without dismissing out of hand.”
“Clarifying basics of different research types (more useful than Research Methods module on my MA course!)”
“The ability to check the trustworthiness of an article.”

Participants were also asked to identify how they would use the learning from the training. Examples of practical applications of learning included: Providing feedback and sharing learning with colleagues; EBP Strategy development and implementation; Make more use of online resources to locate evidence; Be more selective and critical of research used; Make greater use of and reference to research; Service / practice development; Personal development / Post Qualifying training; To use alternative ways of communicating evidence.

3) The increased access to research evidence and evidence-based practice materials

A frequently cited barrier to developing EBP is the inability to access relevant research materials ⁶. Therefore, improving the dissemination and communication of research and evaluation information is essential. The PRU team seek to promote access to relevant research resources available to staff using a variety of mechanisms, some ad hoc and informal (e.g. email alerts, responding to requests from individuals) and

other more structured approaches such as the Evidence Request Service (see box 6).

Box 6: Evidence Request Service

A service which seeks to facilitate access to relevant, reliable research evidence to Barnardo's services through:

- Undertaking literature searches and providing results in summary format in response to practitioners' questions.
- Disseminating and sign posting existing relevant research resources produced internally and by other organisations

Becoming an Evidence Based Organisation: Successes for Barnardo's

Barnardo's experience has led to a number of key successes in progressing the EBP agenda within the organisation;

- Practitioners and managers have been receptive to inputs and given positive feedback on resources produced and training provided
- There has been a commitment to the development of measurable outcomes for all services although continued support for this is needed particularly around measurement of outcomes and demonstration of change.
- A dedicated EBP development officer post funded with a remit for supporting practitioners and managers
- An EBP strategy has been requested and a draft devised with recommendations for senior management

Becoming an Evidence Based Organisation: Challenges for Barnardo's

The implementation of evidence based approaches is not a straight forward process and there are numerous challenges, which have the potential to hinder progress, to be addressed.

- The challenge of creating & sustaining Management 'buy in' to EBP remains and is key to building on our success
- A lack of time and resources required to attend training, to access and read research, -all challenges for the busy practitioner with an already hectic workload.
- A lack of awareness of the role and usefulness of research amongst managers and practitioners and a lack of necessary skills required amongst practitioners / managers (i.e. to locate, appraise, adapt and apply research and to effectively evaluate practice).
- Expert help versus 'do it yourself'? Balancing EBP as something you need expert research help with versus something practitioners and

managers can 'do themselves'. There is the potential for tension between the professionalism of research and of managers not taking on fully their responsibilities to measure their work in terms of measuring and demonstrating outcomes. This emphasises the need for buy-in at senior management level to really make EBP work

- Timely delivery of evidence is important if we are to be responsive to practitioner needs. Much research is outdated before it's published. There's a balance to be struck and a need for more 'quick and clean' reviews of evidence.
- There remains a need for good quality evidence based on local experience. Much evidence is US based and maybe perceived as less relevant to UK practitioners. In addition, we need to encourage and support good quality, well conducted, robust evaluation of practice and encourage services to add to the evidence base.

Reflections and Lessons Learnt

There is a clear need to go beyond dissemination of evidence and increase our focus on the application of evidence to practice and implementation of evidence based approaches, and to evaluate these.

There is a need to continue to identify and respond to gaps in practitioners' skills and knowledge in relation to research and evaluation though provision of training and support. Sustained support and follow through is needed to ascertain the degree of knowledge transfer from training inputs and to identify future learning and support needs.

Addressing practitioners' perception of research is important, but we also need to address researchers' perception of practice. An increased understanding of the differing needs, drivers and perspectives is essential in the production of research relevant to practice.

It is widely accepted that outcomes and practice decisions are influenced by many factors – research is just one factor which often appears near the bottom of a list of other, often more pressing, influences such as policy directives, finances, etc.

There is seemingly an ongoing demand, from those in practice and policy, for user friendly research and the role for practice / policy focused evidence 'summaries' is clear. However, there are an increasing number of research aware practitioners with the skills to locate, appraise, adapt and summarise evidence for themselves. There will always be research savvy practitioners but equally there will remain to be those who will benefit from support.

Issues for the Social Care Sector

The current climate creates a number of challenges and opportunities for the social care sector in terms of developing increased use of research in practice.

Challenges for the Social Care Sector

- There continues to be a lack of relevant, good quality, research in many areas of social care practice. This can be a potential source of frustration for practitioners who are being encouraged to make more use of 'the evidence' - only to find it doesn't exist.
- Practitioners and managers perceptions of priorities. That other things are more important than taking time to find or read research, especially in highly pressured environments (e.g. 'just getting on with the work').
- There can be a cynicism amongst practitioners that despite claims that decisions will be based on 'what works', often these decisions will be made anyway for other reasons, e.g. political/resourcing reasons
- Whilst an increased focus on outcomes has resulted in better practice around the evaluation of services, there is less focus on the evidence which underpins the choice of practice / intervention in the first place. Being able to demonstrate the links between 'what we do' with 'why we do it' remains a challenge for many.
- Developing appropriate support for a diverse sector with a wide variation in the interests, abilities and experience of practitioners. Training and other inputs needs to be tailored to practitioner needs and areas of work – this can be challenging when working with mixed groups of practitioners.
- Tying together any training support with the wide variation of requirements placed on services, especially in the voluntary sector, regarding identification and measurement of outcomes.
- Funding for thorough evaluation of practice is often not included in funding bids. Getting commissioners and funders on board and ensuring sufficient money for evaluation is included in bids is important in encouraging the evaluation of outcomes and in generating evidence from practice.

Opportunities for the Social Care Sector

- A move towards competitive tendering for services and an increased emphasis on outcomes and evidence will mean funders and commissioners will be asking for evidence of effectiveness and evidence of value for money (cost effectiveness).
- There is much existing expertise around the development of EBP in the form of initiatives such as Research in Practice, Research in Practice for

adults¹, Making Research Count², SCIE³, What Works for Children?⁴, the Campbell Collaboration ⁵ and a growing body of evidence on 'what works' in implementing EBP^{7 8}

- Researchers increasingly understand practice/policy contexts which is likely to result in the production of more practice / policy focused research.
- Practice is increasingly becoming outcome driven and an awareness of EBP is becoming an important part of the knowledge base for social care practitioners. This is evident in the increased focus on the use of research and promotion of reflective practice as part of Social Work training and Post Qualifying requirements and the increased focus on practitioner research and the effective evaluation of outcomes of practice.
- There are many keen and interested practitioners who present a captive audience for taking this work forward. This enthusiasm, combined with ongoing organisational support, needs to be captured and built upon.

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More information about **The Evidence Guide** can be found at:
www.barnardos.org.uk/theevidenceguide

Details of Barnardo's **What Works Series** can be found here:
http://www.barnardos.org.uk/resources/research_and_publications/books_and_tools_what_works_in_practice.htm

¹ www.rip.org.uk www.ripfa.org.uk

² www.makingresearchcount.org.uk

³ www.scie.org.uk

⁴ www.whatworksforchildren.org.uk

⁵ www.campbellcollaboration.org/

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