

TOWARDS AN EVIDENCE-LED SOCIAL SECTOR

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**WE NEED TO USE
EVIDENCE MORE
EFFECTIVELY**

NPC believes that effective use of evidence increases charities' positive impact.

But this is currently unrealised because good practices and systems for using evidence effectively are lacking.

Here we set out our vision for an evidence-led social sector and how we can get there.

In this vision we have been deliberately ambitious.

But we also need to be realistic. So we suggest some immediate changes that organisations and sector bodies could make to help us along the journey.

We also look at existing pockets of good practice to show that what we're talking about *is* possible.

What we mean by an evidence-led social sector

An evidence-led social sector means a sector where good quality evaluation data is central to decision-making.

We mean a sector that makes the most of the data—whether organisation-level, or aggregated across several charities or types of interventions—that helps us understand what works, where, why and for whom.

**HOW DOES
GOOD EVIDENCE
HELP US?**

Charities and funders are tackling difficult issues with limited resources: trying to improve people's lives, tackle injustices, change government policies and help cure diseases.

We need to use evidence effectively to understand what works and to, in turn, achieve our missions.

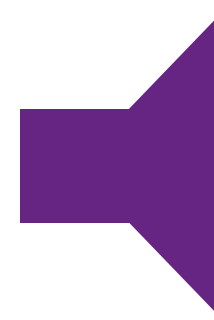
At both the organisational and sector level, building good evidence of what works helps us to:



**IMPROVE
THINKING**



**SAVE MONEY
& TIME**



**COMMUNICATE
BETTER**



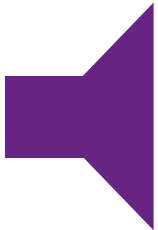
We make **better decisions** by learning which charitable interventions are likely to be most effective.

We are **better equipped** to deal with the complexity of the social issues we are trying to influence.



We improve our day-to-day practice, are **more efficient**, and get the most from our resources.

We ensure we **learn** from our experiences and **improve**.



We are **more open** about what we do, to those we aim to serve, and to those that support our work.

We are **more accountable and credible**.

All of this leads to better outcomes and improved lives.

There is a growing engagement with both the idea of undertaking evaluation and the need to use existing evidence. But true progress is patchy.

We need better practices around how evidence is collected, used, and shared—known as an ‘**evidence journey**’. We need changes in infrastructure to support this.

**WHAT DOES A
BAD EVIDENCE
JOURNEY LOOK
LIKE?**

A FLAWED EVIDENCE JOURNEY

PLAN

DO

ASSESS

REVIEW

Service design

Evidence design

Evidence collection

Evidence use

Evidence reporting

Evidence synthesis

Decisions based on received wisdom, hunches, pet theories, patchy evidence, good intentions.

Frontline workers are unfamiliar with what the evidence says.

Charities want to 'prove' their impact to compete for funds.

Funders want 'proof' of impact to feel comfortable about decisions, and have uncoordinated requirements.

Many charities collect no data, some collect too much.

Everyone designs data collection instruments from scratch, so quality varies.

Staff/volunteers and service users fed up with filling in forms. Poor response rates the norm.

Lots of the data collected is too poor to warrant analysis. Limited capacity and capability to analyse data.

Data analysis is misleading and impact is inflated.

Little or no use made of data by staff/volunteers.

Flashy reports to 'sell' the organisation. No reporting of failures or learning points.

Data unpublished.

Evaluation reports unpublished.

Evaluation reports sent to funders but not read/used.

Nobody feels this is their role. Little research is good enough or relevant enough to be of use.

Focus on the need to 'climb the evidence ladder' regardless of existing evidence reduces scope for consolidation and increasing learning.

**WHAT DOES A
GOOD EVIDENCE
JOURNEY LOOK
LIKE?**



AN IDEAL EVIDENCE JOURNEY

PLAN

DO

ASSESS

REVIEW

Service design

Evidence design

Evidence collection

Evidence use

Evidence reporting

Evidence synthesis

Decisions are based on best evidence, combined with views of practitioners and service users.

A balance of established practice and contextual knowledge is used.

Charities' evaluation activity is determined by what evidence already exists and the stage of development that the service is at.

Funders create clear, appropriate and coordinated requirements.

Performance management is routine and evaluation is occasional. Both use standard, established approaches.

Evidence collection is appropriate and relevant, with strong feedback loops for staff/volunteers — reducing evaluation fatigue.

Organisations have the skills and technology to work with data, and to manage their impact.

Frontline staff/volunteers have access to the data they need to improve their work.

Data is used to improve strategy and service delivery.

High proportion of evaluation reports are published.

Failures and learning points are central.

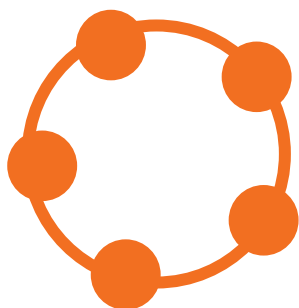
High proportion of data is published for others to analyse and combine with other sources for meta analysis.

Funders, sector bodies and academics bring the evidence together around relevant questions. Steps are taken to communicate evidence to charities.

Charities and funders discuss and collaborate around evidence.



**GUIDING
PRINCIPLES FOR A
GOOD EVIDENCE
JOURNEY**



SHARED

Sharing learning is a key part of everyone's job. Journals and research synthesis processes are widely used to disseminate findings.




CREDIBLE

There is transparency about research methods and established standards on how to interpret different types of data.



VALUES-DRIVEN

There is a belief in the value of evidence and of having a good shared understanding of existing evidence in your field.



**STEPS TOWARDS
USING EVIDENCE
MORE EFFECTIVELY**

To improve the way evidence is being used and generated we must:

- 1 make better use of existing evidence
- 2 have a proportionate approach to new data collection that reflects what is already known
- 3 make better use of data to manage our impact effectively

We need all of the key players in the social sector to play a role in improving the way evidence is used and generated.

Charities
and social
enterprises

Commissioners,
funders and
investors

The Charity
Commission

Government

Academics,
researchers
and think
tanks

- how charities think about and approach using and generating evidence
- how commissioners and funders behave, and what incentives this behaviour sets
- what systems are encouraged by the Charity Commission and wider government
- what approach the social sector research community takes to producing research

All of this has an impact on the extent to which the social sector can be evidence-led

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Each of these actors has a role to play in improving:

Mindset

Behaviour

Infrastructure

Charities
and social
enterprises

Mindset

Grasp the importance of understanding what impact you are having.

Engage with the evidence base for your sector.

Work on developing a lively culture of evidence sharing, discussion and debate.

Promote the value of evidence across your organisation.

As a paid or volunteer practitioner, use the best evidence available to inform and adapt your day-to-day work.

Behaviour

Understand what evidence you need to measure your performance given what's already known.

Know who your service users are, what they think of the service, and the difference it makes for them.

Manage your impact: use and respond to your data.

Publish internal and external evaluations with transparent reporting of research methods, response rates, sample sizes etc. Report failures as well as successes.

Infrastructure

Sub-sector bodies or coalitions establish sector-specific support and guidance on evidence collection and use; lead on compiling, synthesising and disseminating evidence. Lobby for funding for these activities.

Set up structures and incentives to encourage staff/volunteers who engage with evidence and the collection and use of data.

Support bringing together statutory and other data sources for evaluation purposes.

Commissioners,
funders and
investors

Mindset

Engage with the evidence base for the sector that you fund, and user needs, and encourage those you work with to do the same.

Make investment decisions based on the best available evidence.

Promote sector-specific support and guidance on evidence collection and use, and shared measurement initiatives.

Behaviour

Fund organisations that use their results, publish their results transparently and contribute to the evidence base.

Fund, support and disseminate strategic sector-level evaluation and research.

Through reporting requirements steer evaluation activity to be proportionate, and consolidated.

Publish results of all internal and external evaluations.

Infrastructure

Work together with funders in similar areas on sector-level initiatives.

Fund/deliver/support evidence synthesis and dissemination.

Set up proportionate reporting systems, coordinated across funders of the same sector.

Mindset

Ensure transparency in the government's own evaluations.

Use evidence to determine policy.

Focus regulation on improving impact and learning.

Encourage proportionate evaluation and its publication.

Behaviour

Open up government data for analysis. Invest in and improve accessibility of data to charities and funders to help them be more effective.

Fund strategic sector-level evaluation and research.

Change university funding to incentivise collaboration with the social sector and social impact (as well as business).

Infrastructure

Fund/deliver/support/promote evidence synthesis and dissemination.

Convene sub-sectors across the statutory and voluntary sectors to work together on evidence.

Support all [What Works Centres](#) to fully engage with the voluntary sector as well as the public sector.

Ensure regulation encourages a focus on learning and improving impact.

Ask organisations to report on their impact (in proportion to their size), and on what they have learnt on 'what works'.

Make the way organisations and activities are categorised more meaningful to enable better collaboration and synthesis.



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and think
tanks

Mindset

Design, conduct and publish research with practitioners in mind. Undertake research that will be useful to frontline practice.

Work on the questions that will have the most impact, rather than the most popular questions.

Encourage proportionate evaluation and discourage evidence ladders which must be climbed by all organisations.

Behaviour

Work towards a different funding model which does not involve pay walls. Ensure full access to academic research.

Provide support, training and advice to social sector organisations. Complement these with helplines, forums and Q&A to build demand for insight based on evidence rather than just using a broadcast model.

Set and follow proportionate standards for evidence collection.

Infrastructure

Lead and participate in initiatives to facilitate the synthesis and sharing of knowledge, good practice and accessible evidence.

**EFFECTIVE USE
OF EVIDENCE IS
POSSIBLE**



There are already pockets of good practice in each of these sectors, which we can learn from and help spread.

The following few pages offers examples of organisations and projects on the right track.

The NSPCC evidence hub

Larger charities are well placed to support wider learning in their sectors. [NSPCC's Impact and Evidence Hub](#) provides information from around 25 separate evaluations it has performed across its services to help understand the impact of its work.



Charities
and social
enterprises


The hub presents the findings in a clear and understandable way. It outlines both the successes and failures of the work, and presents the tools it uses, allowing others to take similar approaches.

Specific measures for different areas—such as [parenting](#)—are shared with information on target users, how long the measures take to implement, what training or expertise is required, validity and reliability, and what costs apply.

Money Advice Service (MAS)

MAS funds organisations that help people to manage their money. It aims to incentivise programmes that add to knowledge of ‘what works’, and to create a functioning evidence infrastructure in the financial capability sector.

MAS funds organisations to try out tools and outcomes frameworks, bringing back the evidence to its Financial Capability Evidence Hub. The Hub aims to help design interventions and fund programmes and policies by making evidence, insight and learning easier to find and understand.



Commissioners,
funders and
investors

Ministry of Justice

[The Criminal Justice Data Lab](#), proposed by NPC and run by the Ministry of Justice, gives organisations working with offenders access to re-offending data. The information provided helps organisations to assess the impact of their work on reducing re-offending and also helps develop a wider understanding of effective rehabilitation.



Government

What Works Centres

Seven What Works Centres support more effective and efficient services across the public sector, and also engage with the voluntary sector.



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They include the [Early Intervention Foundation](#), which aims to evaluate the evidence of what works and what doesn't work in the area of early intervention—tackling the root causes of social problems for children and young people.

Research in Practice

Research in Practice supports evidence-informed social work practice with children, young people and families. It also champions better use of evidence in children's services more generally.

By providing events, publications, and tailored support (such as evaluation support or bespoke workshops), Research in Practice aims to help practitioners navigate the evidence landscape and gives them knowledge, skills and confidence in their practice.



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TOWARDS AN EVIDENCE-LED SOCIAL SECTOR



It is possible for us to make progress in the way we use evidence of what works.

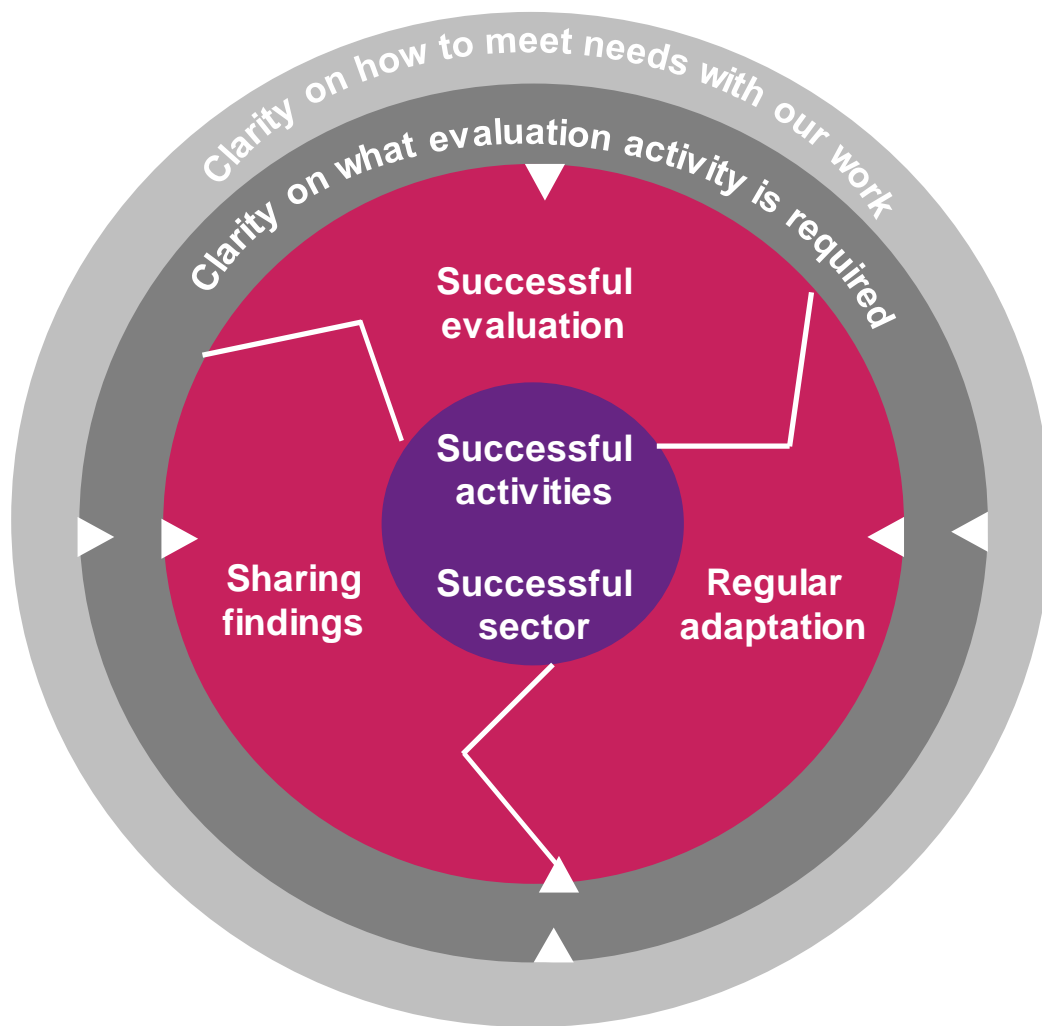
Doing so will be fundamental to the social sector achieving its potential.

And we need all the sector's key players aligned on this...

...Only then will we have sufficient **clarity on how to meet needs with our work**.

With this insight into what we know and what we don't, we gain further **clarity on what evaluation activity we need to undertake**.

This provides the basis for a **successful sector**, where we **evaluate successfully**, regularly respond and **adapt to evidence**, and **share findings** openly to inform sector learning.



FURTHER RESOURCES



Balancing act:
A guide to
proportionate
evaluation



5 types of
data for
assessing
your impact



Data with
destiny: How to
turn your
charity's data
into meaningful
action



Innovations in
measurement
and
evaluation



How to build a
better
evidence
system



Questions
impact
measurement
should
answer





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TRANSFORMING THE CHARITY SECTOR