UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

Data, charities and working with offenders

James Noble and Alex van Vliet

July 2015

Introduction

At NPC we believe in impact measurement as a way for charities and funders to increase their effectiveness. We promote the benefits of good impact measurement across the charity sector, including through the Inspiring Impact programme[1], and encourage organisations to test their assumptions and learn from the systematic use of evidence. We do this so that organisations can improve what they do—we want charities to be more than just well-intentioned: we want them to achieve greater impact for their beneficiaries.

We work across many areas of the charity sector, nationally and internationally, including health, water and sanitation, and youth employment. This paper focuses on the criminal justice sector and the interesting developments we have seen in the way work is evaluated and understood. It is based on evidence from a number of sources, but mainly our observations from working with this sector, including on two specific projects: Improving Your Evidence and the Justice Data Lab. We do not claim that our views are fully representative and acknowledge that the sector is diverse and includes a wide range of practice. Rather we outline some trends and tendencies (to which there will always be exceptions) and draw general conclusions that may be relevant to other sectors too.

This paper raises some key questions: **do charities want to know the impact of their work; and if they don't, why not? Are charities working hard to improve, and understand where they need to act, or are they content just to continue ticking over?** In posing these questions we are not implying that organisations in the public or private sectors always want to know their impact—many of the challenges outlined here are equally applicable to those. But as the think tank for the charity sector we are focusing on the performance of charities.

Charities in criminal justice

The 2010 National Survey of Charities and Social Enterprises (NSCSE) estimated there are 1,475 charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations in England whose main clients are offenders, ex-offenders and their families, with as many as 13,596 voluntary organisations working in some way with offenders as part of their wider remit[2].

Analysis of the NSCSE data by the Centre for Social Justice[3] shows that 51% of the charities whose main clients are offenders, ex-offenders and their families have an annual income of less then £150,000. This relatively small scale is combined with a local focus: 61% carry out their activities at county council level or smaller. While there are some large organisations in the sector such as Catch-22 and CRI, these are in a minority—just 4% of organisations working with offenders, ex-offenders and their families have over 100 members of staff and only 21% operate nationwide.

Clinks' survey of voluntary sector organisations working with offenders and their families shows a mixed funding portfolio—the sector is sustained through grant funding, statutory and/or public bodies, contracts, the sale of products and creative social entrepreneurship. On average, organisations only receive 1.25% of their funding through public giving[4].

Often voluntary sector organisations working in this sector consider reducing re-offending as just one of many outcomes they strive to achieve with their services, and many also focus on improving the lives of offenders and their families. This is combined with the predominance of smaller charities whose particular passions lead to innovative new ideas, such as TheHorseCourse[5], who provide an equine-based behavioural management programme in a small number of prisons.

Charities working in criminal justice tend to focus their efforts on either prisons or the community. Many organisations refer to and use the seven 'pathways' to reducing re-offending[6], originally developed by the National Offender Management Service (but no longer officially used), which sets out the intermediate outcomes that are known to help people move away from crime: things like stable housing, reduced substance misuse, education, employment, positive family relationships and good health. Charities may focus on any one of these pathways, but they all try to contribute to the seventh, usually referred to as 'attitudes, thinking and behaviour'. This pathway is about securing the attitudinal change that underlies all rehabilitation.

Our observation, after working with a number of criminal justice charities and helping them develop theories of change, is that, despite variation in their activities, there is a common mind-set and approach that underlies all their activity. We characterise this as aiming to understand both perpetrators and victims as individuals; as being 'person-centred', 'strengths based' and resistant to 'labelling' participants; and, above all else, built on establishing a level of trust with service users. The statutory sector may also sometimes work with this approach, not least because it reflects 'desistance theory'[7], but many in the voluntary sector argue that they are better placed because they enjoy greater trust from service users, are less tainted by associations with the justice system and have a closer link with communities. We return to this idea of a common mind-set later in the report, as we think it has important implications for evaluation.

The legislative and funding context

To understand the context in which criminal justice charities work, we need to consider Transforming Rehabilitation[8], the government's new programme for the management and rehabilitation of offenders. Amongst its reforms is the opening up of the market to a diverse range of rehabilitation providers through 21 Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs), incentivised through payment by results to reduce re-offending. Each CRC covers a different area of England and Wales and is expected to be innovative in designing and delivering rehabilitation services. CRC's are expected to build supply chains that consist of organisations from the public, private and voluntary sectors through which they will subcontract delivery of some services.

Throughout the reform process the government has emphasised that it wants the voluntary sector to be part of the new system. It has praised its features such as its proximity to local communities, potential for innovation, integrity and direct experience of the issues involved. However, even though the reforms have now been implemented, it is still not certain how many voluntary sector organisations will be involved, what they will be doing, and at what scale.

The effect of all these changes has been to create an extremely uncertain environment for charities in criminal justice. Those charities whose contracts are expiring have found they are not being replaced until the new system is operational. No one yet knows how the new managers of the probation services will behave, or how much they will involve the voluntary sector. Meanwhile, prisons often do not seem to have the time or resources to work with the voluntary sector. The new Justice Minister, Michael Gove, has promised a raft of reforms to rehabilitation for offenders both inside and outside prison—but the shape and success of these reforms waits to be seen[9].

We have also heard the concern that grant funding will diminish as funders start to ask themselves whether they are willing to invest in services that overlap with statutory provision. We have found this is an area in which some funders choose to stand back in an attempt to make government face the consequences of these actions. Some funders are anxious that if they fund activities previously supported by the public sector[10], it will give officials the opportunity to reduce provision in that area further and spend the money elsewhere.

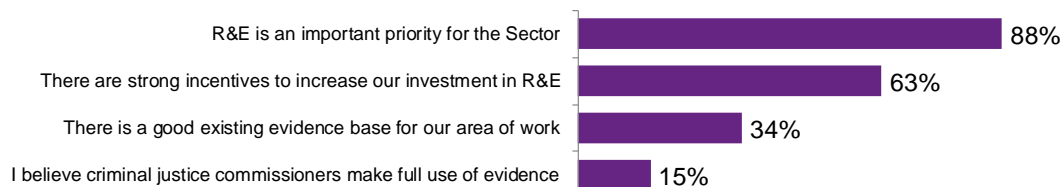## Research and evaluation in criminal justice charities

The reforms to the criminal justice system and the emphasis on 'evidence based commissioning' have meant charities have been increasingly asked to produce evidence of the effectiveness of their services. Charities that have a robust evaluation process, and can prove their impact, are likely to be in a stronger position to engage with funders and commissioners and secure funding to continue their work.

NPC, in partnership with Clinks, ran Improving Your Evidence—a capacity-building project funded by the National Offender Management Service to support voluntary and community sector organisations working in criminal justice to identify, produce and use good quality evidence (discussed in more detail later). At the start of the project we conducted a survey to understand what charities in this space were currently doing around research and evaluation. The survey was openly available and promoted mainly by Clinks. Respondents were a mix of CEOs and evaluation managers.
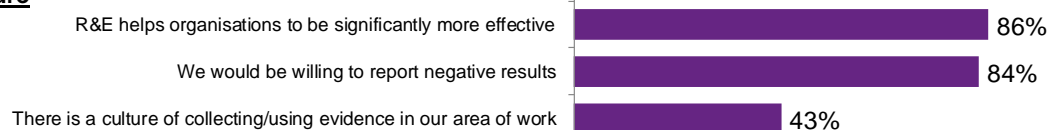
Figure 1 shows levels of agreement with a series of attitudinal statements broadly divided into three themes: those related to incentives at the top; cultural issues in the middle; and capacity at the bottom.

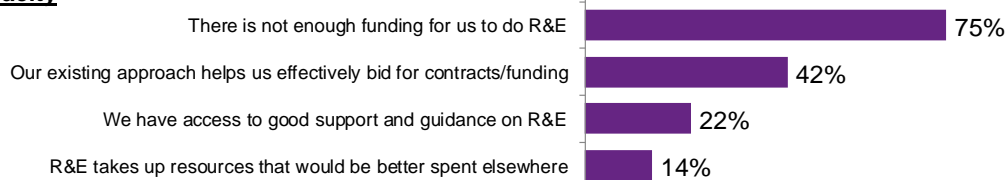**Figure 1: Attitudes to research and evaluation (R&E)**

Incentives

Statement	%
R&E is an important priority for the Sector	88%
There are strong incentives to increase our investment in R&E	63%
There is a good existing evidence base for our area of work	34%
I believe criminal justice commissioners make full use of evidence	15%

Culture

Statement	%
R&E helps organisations to be significantly more effective	86%
We would be willing to report negative results	84%
There is a culture of collecting/using evidence in our area of work	43%

Capacity

| Statement	%
There is not enough funding for us to do R&E	75%
Our existing approach helps us effectively bid for contracts/funding	42%
We have access to good support and guidance on R&E	22%
R&E takes up resources that would be better spent elsewhere	14%

Base: 106 charities working in criminal justice, April-June (2013)

The results tell us that among these respondents there is at least a motivation to do good research and evaluation. Most believe it makes them more effective and that it is an important priority. However, fewer accept the argument that commissioners make full use of the evidence, and even fewer feel there is enough money or support available.

Figure 2 looks at how organisations assess themselves for capacity and capability on a scale from one to ten (from lowest to highest). The graph shows the number of respondents who gave each score, and for both capacity and capability the most common response was three. The graph also shows that capacity rather than capability is generally regarded as the greater challenge, although there are still a large number of organisations that would rate their capability below five (and only around one in ten that give themselves a score of nine or ten).

Figure 2: 'On a scale of one to ten, where one is the lowest and ten is the highest, how would you rate your organisation's…?'
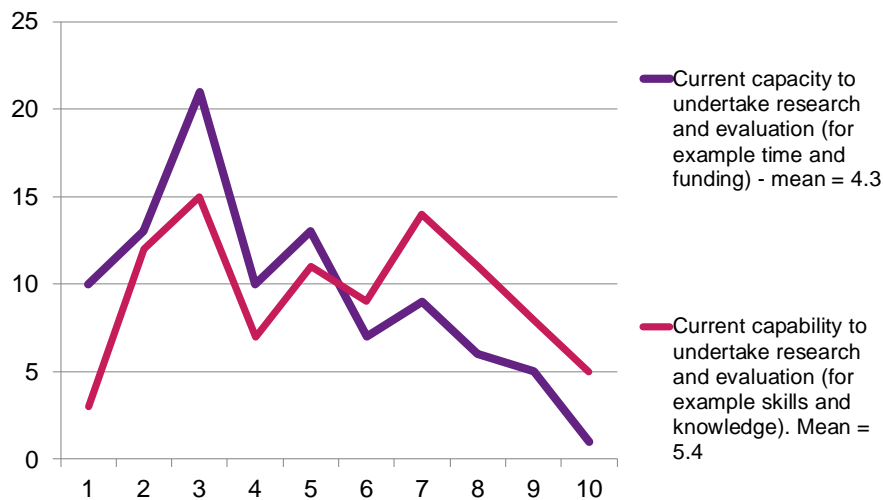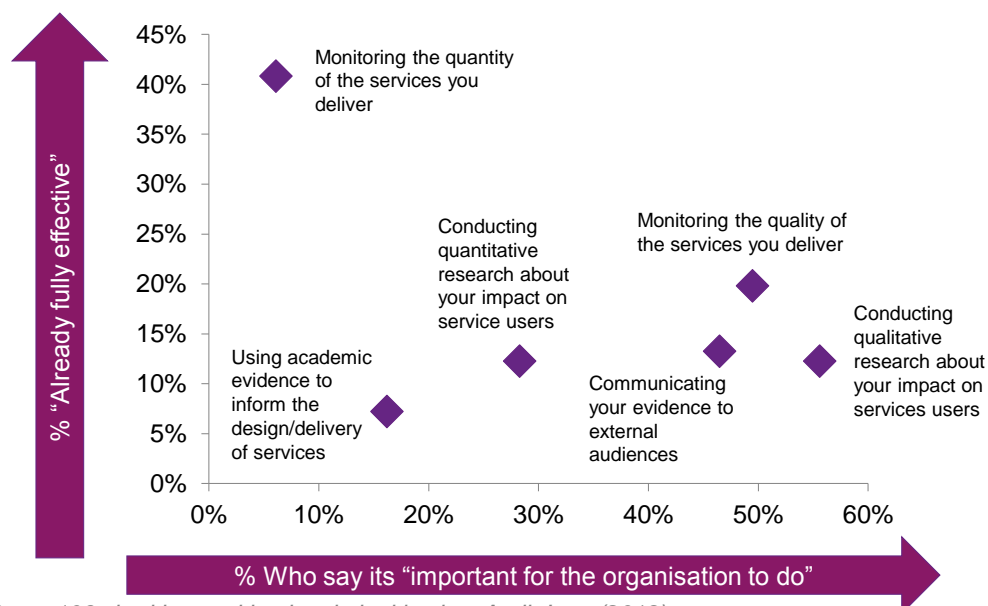

Base: 106 charities working in criminal justice, April-June (2013)

Figure 3 looks at how strongly organisations feel about various tasks (x axis) and which tasks they think are most important for their organisation to pursue (y axis). It shows that measuring quantity of services delivered is the only aspect of evaluation that organisations feel they are particularly good at, and that they regard themselves as equally weak across each of the other tasks mentioned, such as quantitative and qualitative research.

The importance that respondents gave to the different tasks runs from left to right. The question forced people to choose only one or two options, and respondents chose qualitative research almost twice as often as quantitative, which is at odds with accepted wisdom that quantitative evidence is the more powerful. This may be because organisations think qualitative evidence better reflects what they do; it may also be seen as more achievable. It is also worth noting how few respondents believed that using 'academic evidence to inform services' was important or currently effective (an issue we return to later).

Figure 3: Current effectiveness versus perceived importance

Base: 106 charities working in criminal justice, April-June (2013)

These findings highlight how criminal justice charities think about research and evaluation, and where they may need more support.

The Justice Data Lab

Official data in criminal justice is dominated by conviction figures. These are held in the Police National Computer (PNC), which has data on cautions and convictions for everyone in the system. This data is by no means a perfect measure of criminality. First there is the simple fact that reconviction depends on whether someone is caught and convicted, but the figures also depend on more subtle factors like police and court priorities. The data is often used in a binary way (ie, whether someone has re-offended or not), so is insensitive to the gradual reductions in the severity and frequency of offences that characterises most journeys away from crime. But reconviction data remains the key measure in the system. Indeed, it is this data that will determine how the new CRCs will be judged and how much they will be paid.

You may think that any charity working in criminal justice would have regular access to this data to understand their results—but they do not. This data is strictly protected by government and, while there have been mechanisms to allow access in the past, these have been complex and difficult for non-academics to use.

In 2012 we conducted a survey of criminal justice charities[11] and found that only around half of the charities had ever tried to access this data. Of those, half said that getting access was 'always difficult'. It was also apparent that charities were not going through formal routes to get official data but rather through their local probation or police service, which usually meant that any data they did get was unreliable or incomplete. We also identified issues with charities struggling to analyse the data they did obtain, and with producing robust findings of their results.

This issue of accessing this data had been a longstanding problem, and so we saw an opportunity to open this up via a national system and help charities to use it. We conceived of the idea for a 'Data Lab' in 2012 and worked with the criminal justice sector to establish what it should look like and the likely level of demand. We lobbied the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) to implement our recommendations and the Justice Data Lab was launched as a pilot in 2013[12], and confirmed as a permanent service in 2015.

Organisations send in the details of offenders they have worked with, and MoJ statisticians find them in the PNC and report back the aggregate re-offending rate and frequency of re-offending. Better still, MoJ also provides a re-offending rate for a statistically-matched control group, using a technique called Propensity Score Matching[13], to show more robustly if the intervention has made a difference. An example of the analysis conducted is shown in figure 4.

The Justice Data Lab is funded by MoJ and is currently a free service. But an important condition is that all results are published, even if an organisation seems to have no statistically significant effect or, as has happened in a few cases, appears to have a negative impact[14].

Figure 4: Justice Data Lab analysis for Blue Sky
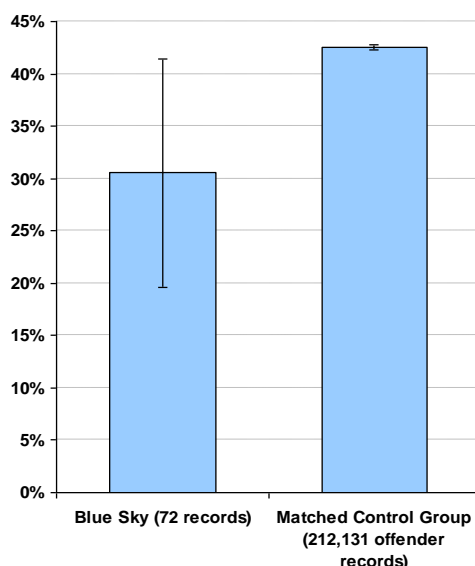
Blue Sky provide short term, full-time employment contracts to ex-offenders. It aims to give people new skills and experiences and ultimately move them into full-time employment elsewhere.

The Justice Data Lab was able to match 72 Blue Sky services users to offender records which could be matched to offenders with similar characteristics

A comparison between the re-offending rates of the two groups showed a lower rate in the Blue Sky group of between 1 and 23 percentage points (illustrated by the black line in the chart). This range is large because of the relatively low sample size, which affects the reliability of the estimate.

However because the difference between the two groups is 24 percentage points this is statistically significant and we can conclude that Blue Sky **is** associated with a reduction in re-offending.

What have we learned from the Justice Data Lab?

The Justice Data Lab (JDL) offers extremely important information which many organisations have never had access to before. It gets around the confidentiality issues—which had previously been a major barrier to progress—by running analysis in-house, so that personal data continues to be strictly limited to MoJ statisticians. And it helps overcome capability issues, too: the matched control group provides a level of evidence that few charities could ever hope to achieve.

But we should bear in mind that it's not a perfect solution. For example:

- Reconviction rates do not tell us everything: the journey away from crime is long and complex and organisations can still contribute to it, sometimes significantly, without being able to show their impact in this kind of analysis.

- Reporting an average re-offending rate for a group of ex-offenders undoubtedly hides a range of successes and failures. For example, projects shown to be effective for some may still be useless or even harmful for others.

- The process of matching the control group cannot account for all factors, particularly when organisations are working with very difficult or complex individuals. For example, the Justice Data Lab is not really appropriate for organisations that target substance misusers because there is no variable on the PNC to match this sample with other substance misusers. Conversely, some organisations may get 'false positives' because their service users are less predisposed to re-offend in the first place.

- The laws of statistical reliability mean that organisations that have worked with larger numbers of people are more likely to get a definitive result. The minimum number of service users organisations can submit to the Justice Data Lab is 60, but even at this level, the findings are most likely to be inconclusive.

- The Justice Data Lab cannot answer more detailed questions such as why an intervention failed or worked, or the optimum type of level of intervention in different circumstances.

Some of these issues are being addressed by the MoJ; for example, Offender Assessment System (OASys) data is now being used to better match the control group to changing circumstances in individual lives as well as more deeply-rooted problems, and outcome variables are being expanded to include the severity of the offence[15].

In terms of what the Justice Data Lab has achieved so far, there are two main questions to consider: what have the results been like and what has been the level of uptake?

Results from the Justice Data Lab

There have been 125 analyses conducted so far. 29 of these have shown that the service is associated with a reduction in offending, 89 have shown inconclusive results (mainly because samples have been too small), and 7 have shown that services are associated with an increase in re-offending. Where results are positive, reductions in the re-offending rate have been around 1 to 10 percentage points, which reflects other studies on the likely impact of the best programmes[16]—but is lower than reductions reported by evaluations using SROI and other methodologies without comparator groups.

Figure 5 below breaks down the results by sector: the voluntary and community sector, private companies, public bodies and educational institutions. The Data Labs are a pilot project, and comparisons should be treated with caution, but early indications from this data suggest that projects categorised as public bodies perform well in bringing down re-offending rates, and that charities do better than private companies.

Figure 5: Justice Data Labs results by sector

Sector	Headline effect on one year re-offending rate			Out of total reports
Voluntary and community sector	Number of reports showing increase	3	7%	43
	Number of reports showing decrease	12	28%	
Private	Number of reports showing increase	4	13%	32
	Number of reports showing decrease	6	19%	
Public	Number of reports showing increase	0	0%	42
	Number of reports showing decrease	10	24%	
Educational institution	Number of reports showing increase	0	0%	8
	Number of reports showing decrease	1	13%	
Total				125

What is clear from the results as a whole is that organisations cannot assume they make a difference (at least by this measure), that rehabilitating offenders is extremely complex and difficult work, and that no single organisation has a magic solution.

There have been success stories, like the [Prison Education Trust](), whose grants to prisoners for studying were associated with a reduction in the re-offending rate from 26% to 19%. But other organisations have not faired so well, including a large-scale community employment support project which only saw a small reduction in re-offending from 27% to 26%.

These early results represent a challenge to the sector. Should an organisation risk subjecting its impact to public scrutiny against what can be a rather unforgiving benchmark? What does it say about an organisation if it is in a position to measure its effectiveness and decides not to?

Uptake of the Justice Data Lab

Based on the size of the sector and the enthusiasm we heard through our consultations, we thought that hundreds of charities would want to use the Justice Data Lab. But most applications so far have been from public services. In fact, fewer than 40 charities have used the Justice Data Lab—a figure much lower than we expected.

Reflecting on this, we have identified some practical barriers to charities using the Justice Data Lab:

- Organisations need to have worked with at least 60 offenders before 2013 to be eligible.

- There have been legitimate concerns about data protection. Is it legal for a charity to tell the government which individuals it has been working with? For some this question has not been adequately answered.

- Some charities have simply not kept records of who they have worked with[*]. Others have not had the resources to pull the information together.

- For some organisations the JDL methodology is not appropriate. For example, where a project is small-scale, the likely impact will be too small or other factors will be too great for the JDL to be likely to show anything. In these circumstances it is reasonable for an organisation to decide not to use the service.

These are reasonable concerns, but thinking back to our question of whether charities want to know their impact:

- Some applicable charities still don't know enough about the Justice Data Lab. Effort should be focused on sharing information more widely.

- Some charities have heard about the initiative, but haven't used it. For some, extra coaching can help them understand what it is and how it could be useful. Others have made a strategic decision not to apply. These

---

[*] A positive impact of the Justice Data Lab is that organisations do seem to be improving the case management and record keeping to facilitate future applications.

charities have reasoned that in the context of a competitive marketplace, there is more risk to using the Justice Data Lab than not (which makes sense if experience has shown that funding does not flow from successful results).

- The incentives and processes for sharing and learning are not strong enough. If enough organisations use the Justice Data Lab we will start to build a detailed picture of what delivers results, but this appeal only seems to resonate amongst a minority of organisations.

- Some organisations just do not back themselves. For example, we have spoken with charities that despite being prime candidates for the Justice Data Lab cannot be persuaded to apply. We conclude that while these organisations believe they make a difference, they are reluctant to test this against the best evidence available.

Given these obstacles, we should give special credit to those organisations that have put themselves forward—many of whom have been active, enthusiastic and responded positively to even disappointing results. But these organisations are an exception.

We continue to see the Justice Data Lab as an important step forward. For the first time ever, charities in criminal justice have a clear pathway to access the most important metric in their line of work. Moreover, it comes with a counterfactual comparison that gets them to level three of the NESTA / Dartington Social Research Unit standards of evidence[17] at little or no cost. In recognition of this, the Justice Data Lab was awarded the Royal Statistical Society's 2014 prize for Excellence in Official Statistics, and we are now working hard to make the Data Lab a model for use across other government departments.

Improving Your Evidence

As previously mentioned, Improving Your Evidence is a project developed by NPC and Clinks with a grant from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) to help develop the evaluation capability and expertise of charities working with offenders.

The project was prompted by the view within government and other commissioners that charities struggle with service evaluation and using the existing evidence base. This is seen as a particular problem in a commissioning environment in which charities should theoretically benefit from being able to test and communicate their impact.

The project began in April 2013 and ran until September 2014, with some follow-up work continuing into 2015. The project's theory of change is shown in figure 6 and we provided both direct and indirect support to charities.

Figure 6: Improving Your Evidence theory of change
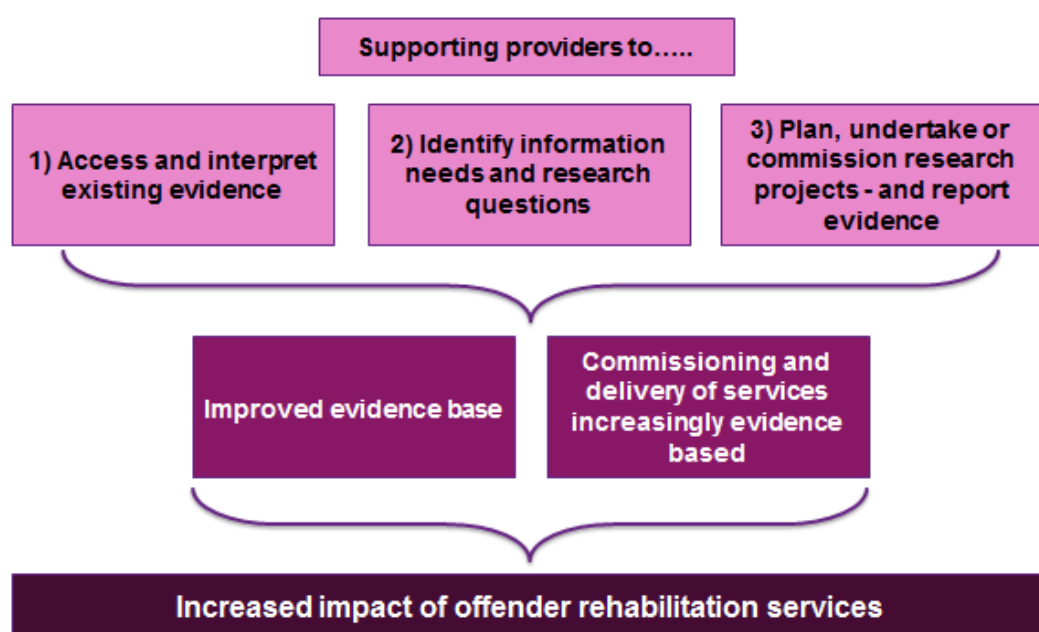
Direct support included four conferences, a two-day evaluation training programme delivered to over 50 charities, and a one-to-one helpline service provided to around a further 50 charities. Typically this entailed a day of support to each charity, although a few received extra support in the course of helping us to develop case studies. The support was mainly to help develop theories of change, data collection approaches and evaluation strategies.

Indirect support included a film to introduce some ideas around evaluation and a shared measurement project helping a group of charities in Southwark to collectively develop a toolkit to measure impact. We also developed a range of guidance documents on the topics below., which are hosted on a dedicated webpage, along with signposting to the existing evidence base.

- Developing a theory of change, with a library of example theories of change
- Developing an evaluation strategy and how to decide what to measure
- Practicalities of qualitative and quantitative research
- Research design using comparison groups, including Randomised Control Trials (RCTs)
- Existing questionnaires, scales, tools or platforms.

What have we learned from Improving Your Evidence?

The process of delivering Improving Your Evidence has helped us to understand better the context in which criminal justice charities work, the challenges associated with using and producing evidence, and what else needs to be done to raise standards in both using and generating evidence.

It is helpful to divide these observations into the three categories—capacity and capability, culture and incentives— which we address in turn below. These observations are based on those charities that chose to engage with us, so they do not necessarily represent the sector as a whole. There are undoubtedly organisations that felt that they did not need our support and were already equipped to use evidence. Equally, we suspect that there are others that felt they needed to improve but did not know about or try to access our support.
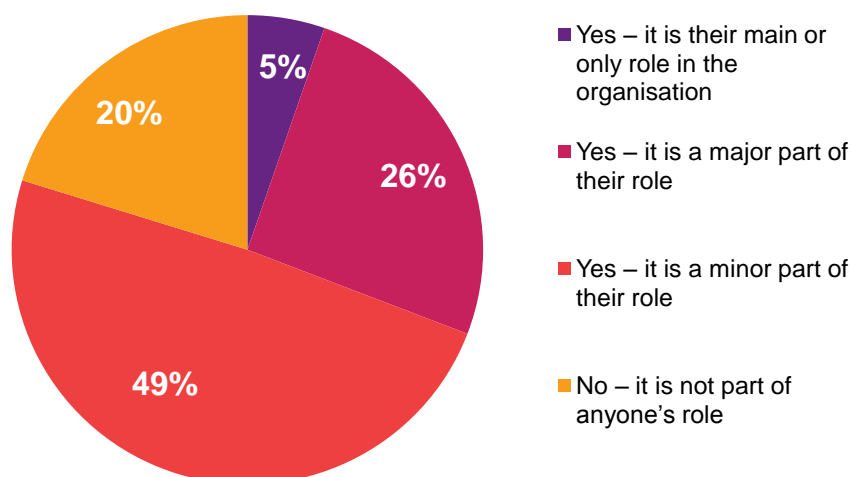
Capacity and capability

Capacity and capability refers to whether organisations have the right expertise and resources to use and collect good evidence.

Capacity is often cited by charities themselves as a reason for not engaging with evidence or conducting the evaluations they would like. For example, only around one in ten charities in our survey said they had enough funding for evaluation. Even a fairly large project with a total budget of £250,000 will only have an evaluation budget of £12,500 (using a 5% rule of thumb), which will not buy a very comprehensive evaluation. Moreover, funders and commissioners do not routinely provide extra money for evaluation.

A charity's response to this challenge is nearly always to do the work in-house, but this raises its own issues around capacity. Project managers are given this extra responsibility even though, as figure 7 indicates, for many it is only a minor part of their role. Equally, frontline staff and volunteers have limited capacity and charities are rightly reluctant to overburden them. Nor do they want to create processes that may harm the delicate relationships they have with service users.

Figure 7: Do you have one person or people in your organisation whose role it is to oversee or implement impact measurement?

- Yes – it is their main or only role in the organisation
- Yes – it is a major part of their role
- Yes – it is a minor part of their role
- No – it is not part of anyone's role

Base: 106 charities working in criminal justice, April-June (2013)

These obstacles around capacity are significant, but should not prevent charities from improving their use of evidence for two main reasons:

- There is plenty of scope for charities to improve the evaluation they already conduct without increasing the budget or resources spent. For example, evidence collection could be more strategic and organised, more focused on the right research questions, and better quality in general.

- Good evaluation and performance management should save charities time and money. It should help them to be more responsive to changing conditions, learn about what is effective, be more efficient and have the highest impact on service users. This might sound idealistic, but through this project we came across organisations we believe could improve their performance significantly through fairly limited investment—by getting better data capture systems, or by analysing the data they already have.

Next we turn to **capability**, which unsurprisingly varies greatly from organisation to organisation. Some have people with a good level of knowledge and understanding of evaluation—often with a relevant academic background and training in research methods. However, just as often the person responsible for evaluation has little or no experience or training or it is seen as a responsibility for the fundraising team rather than someone with an analytical interest. The consequences of this can be:

- Poor quality or no data collection

- Data that is collected but not analysed

- An appetite for seemingly trouble-free, off-the-shelf solutions that may not do what the organisation needs

- A sense of frustration and exasperation at the challenge of meeting perceived evaluation requirements.

As would be expected, there is a link between the size of an organisation and its evaluation capability—but this is not clear cut. Organisations have to be fairly large to actually employ someone with evaluation expertise, but up to that point, whether staff have the right experience seems to be a question of either luck, training or a high level of commitment from the senior team. For example, one organisation we worked with had a single member of staff, but she had a detailed understanding of the academic literature in her area of work and had designed a high quality evaluation approach. Another organisation had three or four members of staff, but none with evaluation experience, and had not been collecting any useful data.

Culture

Culture refers to the sector's attitude to and enthusiasm for evaluation and evidence. Our 2013 survey found that charities generally express positive attitudes to the value of evidence, but few believed that there is a 'culture of collecting and using evidence in our area of work'.

Outside the survey, our own observations are that once again the picture is mixed. A few individuals and organisations lead the way, but others are engaging more reluctantly. Indicators of the strength of a sector's evaluation culture might be:

- The extent to which evaluation results are published

- Whether results are reported objectively

- The effort that is invested in sharing learning across the sector.

Unfortunately by these measures the sector does not score well. Over the last 18 months we have found it particularly hard to identify charities that publish their results, especially in a way that focuses on learning rather than self-promotion and fundraising. We also came across organisations that were initially interested in working with us, but struggled to find the time to prioritise this. So while the principles of good practice may be understood, the reality is not yet matching that ideal.

A specific issue worth mentioning is how we have struggled to engage charities with academic research. It would seem logical that charities are up-to-date with criminological thinking, and designing services around evidence-based principles. This is what the government says it wants[†]—but it does not seem to happen in reality. Instead, services are based more on tradition, pragmatism, experience and individual creativity; 'what seems right at the time' and 'what might be a good idea'. A music project might be combined with post-release mentoring because it

---

[†] Although whether this is reflected in the reality of government policy is a moot point.

seems right and is doable. Academic research might be in the decision-making mix but it is there more indirectly, via folk knowledge and sound bites, rather than genuine engagement and analysis.

The fault for this seems to lies as much with academia as with the sector. Viewed from the outside, the audience for academic research seems to be other academics—little is written with the practitioner and service manager in mind. A large swathe of academic research is not even accessible to charities because of paywalls. A further problem is the 'standards of evidence' agenda which, by only accepting the validity of evidence obtained from experimental methodologies, drastically limits the relevance and usefulness of research for policy and practice[18].

A few research syntheses conducted by NOMS, MoJ and the Scottish Government have helped, promoting some general messages and enabling charities to start engaging with academic research. But even with these available it seems that most practitioners are not accustomed to reviewing this literature or thinking about what it means to them, even though it could help make their work more credible.

Incentives

Perhaps the most important question relates to incentives for organisations to engage in evaluation. Why should a charity improve its use of evidence? What are the driving forces?

The experience of the Improving Your Evidence project suggests that for many charities the main incentives are:

- Accountability to funders and commissioners—to assure them that money has been properly spent
- A communication tool—a way to secure or attract new funding.

However, in our 2013 survey, only 15% of charities thought that funders or commissioners made full use of evidence. We also found a fairly widespread perception that demonstrating impact does not seem to differentiate organisations in terms of survival or growth and that efforts on evaluation are not rewarded. There is suspicion that some funders do not even read evaluation reports.

Furthermore, charities often struggle to understand what is being asked of them. When we surveyed charities for their main information requirement, 75% said they wanted 'information about commissioners' expectations'. We also heard complaints that funders and commissioners are not specific or clear enough about what they want, and that there is a high level of inconsistency within and between funders. Many charities we worked with also felt rather jaded about evaluation following bad experiences of funders micro-managing requirements or making unreasonable requests.

This focus on accountability to funders and commissioners leads to what is perhaps the main problem in charity evaluation: the 'beauty parade'. This is the way charities feel compelled to show their best face because they think it will help their cause. Its effects are endemic; it can be seen in organisations cherry picking case studies, drawing overly-favourable interpretations of data, and designing questionnaires to illicit positive results. Ultimately, the beauty parade problem means that most charity evaluation reports are of limited use—either as a way to understand what impact has been achieved or to find out what has been learned.

For NPC, the solution is for both funders and charities to give much greater prominence to the most important incentives for engaging in evaluation:

- To help organisations monitor and improve their own performance
- To help organisations learn about their effectiveness and impact, and to help them communicate what they have learned
- To encourage collaboration and joint working through shared approaches
- To be accountability to beneficiaries rather than funders.

If these incentives were taken more seriously, organisations would be demonstrating to funders that they have effective systems in place to monitor and improve quality, that they learn from their mistakes and that they contribute their learning to collective understanding. Impact would still be important, but rather than trying to showcase it, organisations would need to show that it is analysed to determine how it can be increased.

To support this development we want to encourage changing attitudes to evidence amongst funders. For example, commissioners should be most interested in questions such as: can organisations articulate what they do and how they work, is this linked to the existing evidence base, do organisations have a track record of delivering and are costs reasonable? Meanwhile, trusts and foundations should be emphasising and encouraging grantees to contribute learning as a way for them to maximise the long-term impact of their giving.

Unfortunately, both funders and providers still seem to intent on setting-up procedures that incentivise charities to paint as positive a picture as possible, but actually provide little real insight or help. There may be good reasons for this, but it seems to us that there are real opportunities for funders and charities to set themselves out from the crowd by publishing robust, honest data that focusses on learning[19].

What next?

So what is needed to improve the use and production of evidence amongst criminal justice charities? At NPC we have been developing the concept of the 'evidence ecosystem', a description of the ingredients a sector needs for the effective use of evidence:

What does a good evidence ecosystem look like?

- Services based on good theories of change that reflect the latest academic evidence.

- Providers collecting and analysing the right information to monitor their performance, including assessment of outcomes data from official sources like the Justice Data Lab.

- A common language of intermediate outcomes and measures across the sector, including standard approaches that can be used by organisations in different settings.

- Fewer, but higher-quality evaluations, particularly focused on innovative services that might help us learn something new.

- An open culture of publishing findings and learning from one another's work.

- Services that have an increasingly positive impact for beneficiaries.

In criminal justice progress towards these aims is fairly mixed, but there some very positive developments. The Justice Data Lab is unique in providing access to government data; the academic evidence is reasonably clear—for example the seven pathways represent a common language around intermediate outcomes and we hope that NOMS will soon publish shared measurement tools for family work, mentoring and arts projects. But what else would help? In our view the following should be priorities.

Continued upskilling and support

The work we have been doing through the Improving Your Evidence project has an immediate impact on organisations, and an indirect impact in the longer term—as those organisations start to lead the way. We have found that a relatively small amount of support can help people through the first steps to developing an effective approach—for example by helping data collection to be more strategic and to report findings more accurately. So more of these kinds of initiatives would be valuable, especially now that there is a solid platform of resources to build this on.

Identifying and promoting good practice to help the sector change from within

To our mind, there are still too few publicly-available examples of how evaluation should be done. We suspect that these would be more valuable than further 'how-to' guides, of which there are plenty and which don't always convey how things can actually be applied. If ongoing support to the sector can be provided, we feel it should contribute to producing more good quality case studies and exemplars that give people a clear idea of what evaluation can do for organisations and what good quality looks like

Developing consistent tools for performance management

Evaluation is complex, especially when you start to think about attribution. What is easier, and is not being done effectively, is performance management. For example, every charity that we have worked with has stressed the importance of building relationships as a key element of its theory of change, yet none has developed a legitimate way to measure these relationships. But this can be quite straightforward; for example through the Southwark measurement project we developed a 'project engagement' scale that all providers could use right away[20].

Finding the right incentives

There are still only very weak incentives for charities to contribute to the wider evidence base and to build a shared understanding about what works. But there are some signs that organisations are open to change. There is a good understanding of why evaluation is important and a will to get things right. There is even some commitment to ideas like the need to be impartial, to accept failure and to consult service users systematically. However, this is really a question for funders and commissioners, who, if they support our vision for the evidence ecosystem, need to rethink the evidence they ask for and the hoops they make organisations go through, and strongly and clearly assert the importance of learning over the 'beauty parade'.

Working towards a greater sense of collaboration and common purpose

Earlier we highlighted how all charities working in criminal justice can be seen to share an underlying approach to offender rehabilitation. Often charities share a common ideology and approach, but at the moment too often they seem to be fighting their corner by themselves. For example, countless mentoring projects, all with similar theories of change, are trying to prove that their methods are effective and secure funding for themselves. Why not look across all these projects and ask what we need to do improve our shared evidence that mentoring is an effective intervention?

In this way evaluation can be empowering; a chance for organisations to put forward a stronger case together. For this to happen we need commitment from everyone towards a more systematic approach and a conscious move away from competition. The onus must be on funders to support this way of thinking and reward charities that go down this route—although there is a strong argument that power should rest with neither party, but with the beneficiaries they seek to help, which could compel us to focus on what works rather than on competing with one another.

Developing a system for synthesising evidence

Even if we are able to collaborate on better evaluations, we would need a system to share and synthesise that information. In the criminal justice sector this isn't currently anyone's job. The most likely candidate would be the What Works Centre, but will focus more on crime reduction. Similarly the Probation Institute or infrastructure bodies could take on this role, but whether they do so will depend on their other priorities. If resources are found, we would need to think about what such a system should look like. There are precedents in other sectors—the Education Endowment Foundation in education or Project Oracle in the youth sector. If an organisation were able to take on the responsibility for synthesising and updating evidence, we would like to see a move away from the model of accrediting individual programmes as evidence-based or not, because it does not do enough to encourage learning and may exacerbate the competitive mind-set described above. Rather, synthesis should focus on evidencing what

it is about programmes that makes them work, what are the common factors and differences, what works for whom and in what circumstances.

All this might look like we are advocating for more and more resources to be invested in evaluation. However, we would prefer to see it as making better use of what we do already—there may even be real opportunities to reduce the amount of evaluation. As Caroline Fiennes wrote for the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#): *'once we know whether and when [something] works…then we know and don't need to evaluate again (unless the context is very different)…we don't expect every hospital to be a test-site. The clinical trials are done somewhere…and then published so that everybody else can use the results'*[21].

Finally, we can return to the question we asked at the start: do charities want to measure their impact? On the basis of those we have engaged with through these projects we conclude that they do, but this desire is currently trumped by the need to survive and the perception, rightly or wrongly, that the way to do this is to collect evaluation evidence that supports their individual case. Perhaps this is an unavoidable consequence of the competitive environment in which these organisations operate, but there are some positive signs. Many of the ingredients needed to promote change are present, but the incentives and the directions for charities need to be clearer. We hope that some of the messages in this paper can encourage further debate and development.

Summary: a call to action

To conclude we outline some key action points for different players within the criminal justice sector:

Charities

- If the Justice Data Lab can produce results then you should use it to measure your impact.
- Use the existing evidence base on criminal justice as much as possible. Link your theories of change to what is already known.
- Use Clink's free resources to inform your evaluation design. Be strategic about data collection; collect the minimum from all service users and generalise from more in-depth research.
- Collaborate with other organisations doing similar work. Coordinate data collection, research and analysis.
- Publish and share your results. Be honest about failure.

Funders

- Work together to get more consistency in your requirements. Reduce bureaucratic processes.
- Reward organisations that do good quality evaluation and are honest about what has and hasn't worked.
- Fund evaluation projects.
- Fund the synthesis of evidence from charities.

Academics

- Conduct research and write results with service providers in mind.
- Make your work accessible to the charity sector by publishing it online and ideally with an open license.

Government

- Be more open to different types of evidence (as long as it is good quality). 'Clinching' evidence from counterfactual studies is not all that matters[22].
- Fund the synthesis of evidence from charities.
- Keep opening-up administrative data for charities to better understand their effectiveness and impact.

REFERENCES

[1] http://inspiringimpact.org/

[2] Cabinet Office, Office for Civil Society (2010) *National Survey of Charities and Social Enterprises.* Accessed via Clinks (2014) *Renewing our bond with the third sector*

[3] Centre for Social Justice (2013) *The new probation landscape Why the voluntary sector matters if we are going to reduce reoffending*

[4] Clinks (2015) *The state of the sector 2015*

[5] http://www.thehorsecourse.org/

[6] National Offender Management Service: Home Office (2009) *The National Reducing Re-offending Delivery Plan*

[7] Clinks (2013) *Introducing desistance: A guide for voluntary, community, and social enterprise organisations*

[8] https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/transforming-rehabilitation

[9] See for example http://www.politics.co.uk/news/2015/07/17/prisoners-could-earn-release-through-education and http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/new-justice-secretary-michael-gove-to-combat-dysfunctional-court-system-10337772.html

[10] NPC (2015) *Times of change: Briefing on public sector commissioning*

[11] NPC (2012) *Unlocking offending data*

[12] Ministry of Justice (2014) *Justice Data Lab: The pilot year*

[13] Propensity score matching is a statistical technique used to create a matched control group of offenders who share a similar profile to the offenders an organisation may work with. For more information see Ministry of Justice (2013) *Justice Data Lab Methodology Paper*

[14] All the results can be found here: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/justice-data-lab-pilot-statistics

[15] Ministry of Justice (2015) *Justice Data Lab: Pilot summary*

[16] See the following article for a further discussion: http://www.courtinnovation.org/research/joan-petersilia-professor-stanford-university-law-school

[17] Puttick, R. and Ludlow, J. (2013) *Standards of evidence.* NESTA

[18] See Prior, D. and Mason, P. (2010) *A different kind of evidence? Looking for 'what works' in engaging young offenders.* Youth Justice (Paywall) and Hough, M. (2010) *Gold standard or fool's gold? The pursuit of certainty in experimental criminology.* Criminal Justice 10 (Paywall).

[19] See for example NPC's work on strengthening the Social Value Act http://www.thinknpc.org/media/press-releases/cabinet-office-heeds-npcs-call-to-give-teeth-to-social-value-act/

[20] Clinks, NPC and CAS (2014) *The Southwark Reducing Reoffending Evidence Toolkit,* p.11

[21] Fiennes, C. (2013) *Most charities shouldn't evaluate their work: part one.* The Stanford Social Innovation Review blog.

[22] Cartwright, N. (2007) *'Are RCTs the Gold Standard?' BioSocieties, 2, p. 11–20.*

TRANSFORMING THE CHARITY SECTOR

NPC is a charity think tank and consultancy which occupies a unique position at the nexus between charities and funders, helping them achieve the greatest impact. We are driven by the values and mission of the charity sector, to which we bring the rigour, clarity and analysis needed to better achieve the outcomes we all seek. We also share the motivations and passion of funders, to which we bring our expertise, experience and track record of success.

Increasing the impact of charities: NPC exists to make charities and social enterprises more successful in achieving their missions. Through rigorous analysis, practical advice and innovative thinking, we make charities' money and energy go further, and help them to achieve the greatest impact.

Increasing the impact of funders: NPC's role is to make funders more successful too. We share the passion funders have for helping charities and changing people's lives. We understand their motivations and their objectives, and we know that giving is more rewarding if it achieves the greatest impact it can.

Strengthening the partnership between charities and funders: NPC's mission is also to bring the two sides of the funding equation together, improving understanding and enhancing their combined impact. We can help funders and those they fund to connect and transform the way they work together to achieve their vision.

www.thinkNPC.org