

# Developing an evidence service for the children and families workforce



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## References

Morton, S. (2012). Exploring and Assessing Research Impact. Social Policy. Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh. PhD.

## Authors and acknowledgements

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Centre for Research on Families and Relationships  
The University of Edinburgh,  
23 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh EH8 9LN

Tel: 0131 651 1832  
Fax: 0131 651 1833  
E-mail: [crfr@ed.ac.uk](mailto:crfr@ed.ac.uk)

A consortium of the Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian, Highlands and Islands and Stirling.

# Developing an evidence service for the children and families workforce

## Introduction

Barriers to using research in developing policies and services are well documented. Practitioners may lack the time and resources to access research, the skills to interpret or synthesise relevant findings, and the organisational culture to utilise research findings in their work. Policymakers and practitioners want help to identify high quality, relevant evidence, and while professionals may understand the importance of evidence in their work, many need help translating it into practical tools.

The Evidence Request Bank - a 1 year pilot development project - aimed to open up the evidence base for delivering public and third sector services to children and families by supporting services to identify their knowledge gaps and consider how evidence could help address them. The Evidence Request Bank provided reviews of relevant evidence, and supported services to plan how to use evidence in practice.

This briefing gives insight into the model that CRFR developed to support organisations to access and use evidence for action. It shares how project partners used the evidence and what we learned about delivering an evidence service to support evidence-informed work.

## Background

### Capturing learning and impact

We used a Research Contribution Framework based on contribution analysis (Morton 2012) to both identify the context, processes and relationships in which change may be possible and also to create links between the project inputs, outputs and outcomes which are meaningful for everyone involved.

## Key points

- **Identifying gaps in knowledge:** CRFR developed a process to help people to think through and articulate: what they want to know from existing research and why this will help them in their professional role.
- **Clarifying need:** Even when people want to use evidence to inform their work, they find it difficult to be clear about what they want to know and to make decisions about what should be prioritised.
- **Addressing gaps in knowledge:** clear communications and encouraging open discussion throughout the process of producing evidence reports has been important. It has helped to foster a shared understanding and manage expectations over what evidence might or might not be able to address, whilst also enabling people to revisit why they wanted the evidence.
- **Approaches to using evidence may differ** depending on the context and purpose of why it is needed, and on the previous experience of staff in using evidence in their work.
- **Planning to use evidence:** involving whole teams in discussions on how to use evidence was important. It helped to explore people's different understanding and expectations of using evidence and demonstrated how evidence can inform service delivery. It also helped to direct resources where they were most likely to be effective.
- **Reactions to evidence:** a range of issues may affect how organisations react to evidence - if evidence is expected to 'give the answers', contradicts existing services or approaches, or challenges current views. Even where organisations want to use evidence, services may not have the resources to change in response.
- **Demand for an evidence service:** while the children and families workforce want to access evidence and receive support to use it, they do not necessarily have capacity to pay for an evidence service. It may be difficult for organisations to commit resources up front to an evidence report without knowing what it is going to say and how it can be applied.

## Evidence to action (E2A) cycle developed during the 1 year pilot

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO KNOW ?

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

HOW CAN YOU USE THE RESEARCH?

WHAT CAN YOU DO DIFFERENTLY?

SHARING AND LEARNING

The Evidence Request Bank (ERB) developed an evidence-to-action cycle in order to explore ways in which organisations can be supported to access and use evidence to inform their work. As well as supporting the partners we piloted this with, this enabled us to explore a potential model for an evidence service:

1. *Evidence request:* The ERB supported organisations to identify what they wanted to know and refine these 'knowledge gaps' in order to make a specific request for evidence to address them.
2. *Evidence response:* The ERB produced an appraised report, which provides an overview of the existing research evidence and comments on its relevance

and applicability to the request that has been made. We used peer and user reviewers to provide a quality and relevance check for each report.

3. *Planning to use evidence:* The ERB supported organisations to consider the evidence and plan how they could use and share the evidence from the report.
4. *What is done differently:* The ERB collected information about what the organisation had changed or done differently as a result of using evidence.
5. *Sharing evidence:* The report was lodged into an on-line Evidence Bank allowing further access, use and learning.

## Evidence in action: How partners are using the evidence reviews

**West Lothian Council:** used an evidence review on transitions to primary school to create a driver diagram to inform tests of change as part of its Early Years Collaborative work. The review enabled them to direct resources to areas that are likely to be effective, and help practitioners be confident that they are doing the right things in a complex area. This E2A cycle is being developed as a 'worked example' of good practice for wider sharing.

**Parenting Across Scotland:** held a seminar to discuss a review of data on family households, used the data to inform its online information resources and policy work, and will discuss specific areas, gaps in data, and implications for policy and practice further

both with its partnership and other organisations. Having complex and wide ranging statistics digested into an accessible and readable format enables PAS to raise awareness of family household issues with a wide audience.

**Parenting Across Scotland** and the **Scottish Government** are developing accessible materials (e.g. infographics) from the report on family households for further sharing.

**Children in Scotland:** is planning forum events to discuss implications of the ERB evidence reports relating to children and families, and sharing evidence through its training programme, magazine and website.

## What worked well?

**Support is valued:** Partners felt the support provided by the Evidence Request Bank (ERB) service was relevant and useful. The processes and tools developed supported them to implement the evidence to action process, and the project was beneficial.

**Identifying knowledge gaps:** Having the opportunity to work collaboratively to identify gaps in their knowledge helped partners to think through and articulate what they wanted to know and why. Having tools devised by the ERB team further helped this process. Appropriate and timely support, in the early stages of project and service planning, worked well.

**Addressing knowledge gaps:** Having a clear research strategy and initial scoping of the evidence base helped to clarify parameters, expectations and evidence needs. Open discussion fostered shared understanding, managed expectations over what the evidence can and cannot say, enabled people to revisit initial plans for using the evidence, and help ensure the reports addressed evidence needs.

**Peer and user review:** As well as helping to ensure evidence reports are robust, peer and user review can also help reviewers to understand evidence user needs. As a result of reviewing ERB evidence reports, reviewers reported increased understanding of how evidence can be best presented for use by the third and public sectors.

**Planning evidence use:** Discussing how to use evidence helped to integrate thinking within teams. Evidence use plans directed resources where they are most likely to be effective, and improved the culture around evidence informed practice by demonstrating how evidence can inform service delivery.

**Training student researchers in knowledge exchange:** The 'Writing for Knowledge Exchange' trainees developed skills in selecting, reviewing and appraising evidence for practice needs; writing in plain language for a mixed non-academic audience; and increased understanding of the research use environment and the needs of non-academic research users. Their experience influenced how they think about presenting and using evidence: realising the complexity of evidence users' environments and needs, appreciation of the skills required for plain language writing, greater confidence in taking their own research outwith academia, and more efficient ways of reviewing large bodies of literature.

## What we learned

**Knowledge service landscape:** A bespoke evidence service which has the capability to respond to the gaps in practice knowledge among Scotland's children and families workforce does not appear to be currently available.

**Demand for an evidence service:** While the children and families workforce indicated a desire for evidence and support

to use evidence, they do not necessarily have capacity to pay for an evidence service. Also, it may be difficult for organisations to commit finances and other resources up front to an evidence report without knowing what it is going to say and how it can be applied.

**Reactions to evidence:** A range of issues may affect how organisations react to evidence. For example, evidence can be expected to 'give the answers' rather than be seen as a process, evidence may contradict existing services or challenge current views, or evidence may not fit with other contextual drivers and priorities. Even where organisations react positively to using evidence, services may not have the resources to change in response.

**Identifying knowledge gaps:** People find it difficult to explore, articulate and prioritise what it is that they want to know and why, even when they value using evidence in their work. People will also vary in their capability to interpret and use evidence, suggesting that there are potentially training needs to consider as well.

**Quality takes time:** Balancing timescales to meet user needs while ensuring sufficient discussion and high quality reports can be difficult.

**Planning evidence use:** Approaches to using evidence may differ depending on context, purpose, and experience of using evidence for action. It may be more challenging to support organisations less engaged with and experienced in evidence informed planning than project partners.

**Limitations of a short project:** The Evidence Bank employed 1 full-time member of staff for 1 year -with the resources and timeframe available, it was difficult to develop and test a range of processes, tools and report formats, complete full E2A cycles in a staggered process to enable learning from each cycle to inform the next, and demonstrate outcomes relating to evidence use. Engagement, developments and activities needed to align with partners' existing strategic priorities, workplans and timeframes, limiting the progress that can be realistically made within a short project. It takes time for organisations to consider and embrace new ways of working.

## Further developments: what next for the ERB?

In the immediate future, the Evidence Request Bank (ERB) will be integrated with What Works Scotland (WWS), a new initiative to improve the way local areas in Scotland use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform. WWS is a collaboration between the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow and funded by ESRC and the Scottish Government for 3 years until 2017. The ERB will sit within the WWS Evidence into Action stream, led by CRFR, serving WWS while continuing explorations over longer-term sustainability. See <http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/>

For more information on how the evidence bank can support the children and families sector, please contact CRFR.

See <http://www.crfr.ac.uk>