Practice recommendations

- Evaluation frameworks should be developed in a collaborative manner with project staff, in order to stimulate reflection on practice and service development. Using a collaborative approach puts the emphasis on learning through evaluation, rather than external judgement.
- Training and ongoing support in the contribution analysis approach are very important. It is also important to consider who has 'ownership' of the evaluation initiative, as a loss of key stakeholders can threaten the ongoing use of evaluation.
- Data collection for evaluation should be built into existing systems of work as much as possible.
- It is important to provide multiple routes for service users to give feedback, including finding ways of taking into account the informal feedback that may arise within the relationships between service users and practitioners.

References

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Evaluating the Young Mothers' Service using contribution analysis: lessons learned

This briefing reports on an evaluation initiative conducted by the Early Intervention team of West Lothian Council, with support from CRFR. The briefing focuses on how this evaluation initiative worked for the Young Mothers' Service, a needs-led keyworking service for mothers under 25. Key areas of learning are identified and recommendations are made for future practice.

Key points

- Contribution analysis was a useful approach to the evaluation of a service for young mothers. It prompted reflection on current practice and service development, and also created a rich body of evidence that was useful for reporting purposes.
- Initial training on contribution analysis and ongoing peer support were helpful in developing and applying the approach.
- High workloads and the loss of key stakeholders created complications for embedding the evaluation approach into the long-term work of the service.
- Data collection for evaluation was partly built into existing systems of working, rather than creating new work for practitioners. Numerical data was relatively easy to compile, while qualitative data collection presented more of a challenge.
- Multiple methods of collecting feedback from young mothers were required. One unresolved issue in the evaluation was how informal feedback from young mothers could be 'translated' into evidence for evaluation.

Background

In recent years, there has been a significant discussion about public service reform in Scotland. As budgets tighten, there is a growing focus on outcomes and evaluation of public services' contribution to those outcomes. CRFR has supported organisations to build evaluation into their work, to help them reach their goals and demonstrate outcomes, rather than evaluation being a separate activity that is 'bolted on' at the end of a project (Morton 2015).

Within this climate of outcomes focus and evaluation, the Early Intervention team at West Lothian Council developed a new initiative for monitoring and evaluating their suite of services. This project took place from 2013-2015 and was carried out in partnership with CRFR. The aims of this project were: to up-skill relevant staff in evaluation approaches, develop suitable outcome indicators and sources of data, and to embed evaluation as a tool for ongoing service planning and development. The partnership with CRFR provided support for these aims and activities, and added an element of external scrutiny to the evaluation process.

This briefing focuses specifically on the evaluation framework developed with the Young Mothers' Service, a keyworking project run by Sure Start. The service supports pregnant and parenting women under the age of 20, as well as women aged 21 to 25 years old who meet certain criteria. The service aims to help young mothers cope with the everyday challenges they encounter, and to support them through more pronounced periods of crisis. The support offered by keyworkers is tailored to what each woman needs, with the young mothers identifying their own personal goals. The ultimate goal of the service is for the young mothers to experience improved wellbeing and confidence, therefore improving the life chances for themselves and their children.

The study: using a contribution analysis approach

The framework developed for this evaluation was based on contribution analysis, an approach that assesses a programme's contribution to observed results (Mayne 2008). In a contribution analysis approach, evaluators identify the outcome that a service hopes to improve, and develop a 'theory of change' about how the service will bring about that improvement (Better Evaluation 2015). This theory is expressed visually, in the form of a results chain showing how each stage of the project links to the next.

The results chain for the Young Mothers' Service was developed through a collaborative process. First, the keyworkers, service manager, and council researcher brainstormed their goals for the service during an interactive session. The goals identified from the initial brainstorming session were winnowed and condensed to eventually create the results chain.

Young Mothers' Service results chain

What resources will be invested, and what activities will take place?

Keyworkers: 2 full-time and 1 part-time.

Primary activity is needs-led keyworking, with support tailored to each young mother's specific circumstances.

Keyworkers foster strong interagency links to help young mothers access other support—for example, to take part in education or employment.

Which young mothers are eligible, and how will young mothers find out about the service?

All pregnant and/or parenting women under 20 are eligible for the service. Young mothers under 25 are eligible if they meet certain criteria, such as experiencing mental ill health.

Young mothers will mainly be referred to the service by health visitors, Family Nurse Partnership and Social Work. They may also be referred if they attend Sure Start or other local parenting groups.

How do we hope young mothers will react to the service?

Young mothers will find their relationship with keyworkers positive and supportive.

Young mothers will feel included in deciding how keyworkers will support them.

What knowledge, capacities and understanding will change as a result of engaging with the service?

Young mothers will feel more confident about coping with the events of day to day life, as well as how to access more focused support in a crisis.

Young mothers will feel hopeful about the future.

As relevant to their specific circumstances, they will learn information about child development, what children need in the home environment, and attachment and relationships.

What changes in behaviour and practices are expected as a result of using the service?

Young mothers create a stable and healthy home environment for themselves and their children.

As appropriate, young mothers remain in or seek further education/employment.

What overarching outcomes do we hope this service will contribute to?

Improved wellbeing for mother and child.

Decrease in statutory Social Work involvement with the family.

During the process of creating the results chain, the team also thought about the assumptions being made in moving from one stage to the next. This helped them identify the associated risks to the project's success. For example:

> **Young mothers will find their relationship with keyworkers positive and supportive.**
>
> **Assumption:** Keyworkers are trusted and seen as useful and needed
>
> **Risk:** Young mothers may be suspicious of keyworkers, or engage tokenistically to avoid statutory contact with Social Work—meaning that they may not get much out of the service.

The researchers and staff team worked together to create indicators that corresponded to the goals expressed at each level of the chain. They also considered what evidence would be required to measure the indicators, and a plan for collecting data was created. For example:

> **Goal: Health visitors, Family Nurse Partnership and Social Work make appropriate referrals to the service**
>
> **Indicators:** Total number of referrals made
> % of referrals that meet criteria
> Breakdown of referrer type (ie health visitor, social work)
>
> **Evidence:** data is collected monthly by service manager

Once the outcomes, indicators, and evidence at each level of the results chain had been agreed, the team began to populate the results chain with data. This created an initial 'contribution story' about the service that could be examined for patterns and gaps in the evidence being collected. Over the course of the evaluation project, this contribution story was revised, challenged, and strengthened as more data was collected.

What did we learn about using contribution analysis for evaluation?

Using a collaborative approach put the emphasis on learning through evaluation, rather than external judgement: The service manager and the keyworkers said that the experience had prompted useful reflections about their work. For example, the process of creating the results chain was an opportunity for the keyworkers to articulate their vision for the service. They also examined the assumptions that underpinned that vision. Because the process of populating the results chain was ongoing, and took place over several months, there was ample time to discuss emerging patterns in the data and possible ways of responding in terms of service development.

The contribution analysis framework was also useful for reporting: Managers at the council, responsible for reporting and budgetary concerns, found that the combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence used in the evaluation created rich, nuanced reports. The reports, drawing on a

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> " Conducting the evaluation was really useful; it allowed us to make changes to the service and gave us a strong case in fighting for more money. When we considered extending support to individuals in a wider age range, the evidence gained through the evaluation gave us the confidence to make the decision to do so."
> Paula Huddart, Group Manager
> Early Years and Early Intervention Services, West Lothian Council

variety of data, also highlighted that contribution is not always linear, and provoked discussion about what 'success' looked like. Managers anticipated that these rich reports would be helpful in a variety of ways, but particularly when making the argument for continued funding of the service.

Training and ongoing support were important: CRFR provided information, training and informal support about evaluation and contribution analysis to the council's Early Intervention research officer, who in turn held development and training days for project staff. As the evaluation progressed, the research officer provided ongoing support and worked closely with the Young Mothers' Service keyworkers and service manager. Both the research officer and the service manager noted how important these layers of support had been during the initiative.

High workloads and loss of key stakeholders created complications: Workloads were an issue for everyone involved: the keyworkers, service manager, and council research officer. There was an ongoing conversation about how to embed data collection for evaluation without creating a significant increase in workload. One useful tactic was for the research officer to develop standardized templates and spreadsheets for the service manager to use. A research assistant from CRFR was employed for one day per week, to support the research officer with data analysis and report writing.

The contribution analysis initiative was driven by key stakeholders in the Early Intervention team at the council. Over the course of the initiative, two of these key stakeholders left the council for other employment, meaning that the project ended earlier than expected. While, hopefully, the Young Mothers' Service manager and keyworkers felt comfortable about their own skills in evaluation, it was not clear whether the specific contribution analysis approach would be sustained without champions within the local authority.

It was relatively easy to gather quantitative data: The data that was needed for the early stages of the results chain was mainly numerical. This included the number of young mothers and children involved with the service, the keyworkers' caseloads, and the number of referrals coming in. Some of the higher level outcomes could also be partially evidenced with quantitative data. For example, keyworkers used a standardized questionnaire to assess mothers' wellbeing when they first entered the service, and followed up three months later. This created quantitative scores that were used as evidence that improvements had occurred in maternal wellbeing.

Compiling qualitative data in a systematic way was a challenge: The main gaps in the evaluation were found in areas that required qualitative data—for example, changes in the young mothers' confidence and hopes for the future. While keyworkers kept detailed case notes which contained

this information, there was no system in place for extracting and compiling relevant information from the case notes for the purpose of evaluation. This was mainly a workload issue. The service manager was reluctant to impose more paperwork on the keyworkers, who were already stretched thin, and case notes could not be passed to the researchers for data extraction because of confidentiality. The information from case notes was therefore never integrated into the 'big picture' of the evaluation.

Collecting feedback from the young mothers themselves raised complex issues: One gap identified by the evaluation was that feedback from young mothers was not systematically collected. The keyworkers were confident that most of the young mothers trusted them, found them useful, and felt involved in deciding how keyworkers would support them. This confidence was based on the keyworkers knowing the young mothers well and developing relationships with them over time. However, there was not any formal evidence of young mothers' feedback to keyworkers.

In order to collect young mothers' feedback in a more formal way, researchers attempted to arrange a focus group with some of the women. There was little interest, however, even when childcare, transportation, and gift vouchers were offered. Phone interviews were somewhat more successful, with three young mothers agreeing to participate. A post-involvement questionnaire was sent to 21 young mothers, asking about their experiences. Three of these questionnaires were returned.

The limited formal feedback that was collected from the young mothers did support the keyworkers' beliefs that the women experienced the service in a largely positive way. However, there was an issue with selection bias, especially for the interviews; because of confidentiality, young mothers were first approached about doing an interview by their keyworker. The women who felt positively about the service were most likely the ones who were approached, and who would be willing to participate. However, keyworkers felt that the young mothers 'told' them in less formal ways if they were unhappy with the service, or wanted less contact—for example, by not answering the phone or avoiding them. The project ended before a method could be developed to translate these less formal ways of communicating into evidence for evaluation.

The issue of collecting feedback from the young mothers, therefore, raised complex issues that were never tidily resolved. While collecting formal feedback was important, especially in terms of having concrete evidence about young mothers' experiences, it was equally important for keyworkers to be sensitive to more informal ways of communicating. However, these informal and relational ways of understanding 'feedback' were not easily incorporated into an evaluation framework, and the service manager and keyworker acknowledged that it was difficult to collect formal feedback from women who felt more negatively about the service.