Evaluation of the Early Action Neighbourhood Fund: Insight Report

Exploring Small N Approaches to Attributing Impact

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Introduction

The Early Action Neighbourhood Fund (EANF) is a joint funding initiative emerging from the Early Action Funders Alliance, a collaboration of funders from different sectors with an interest in supporting early action approaches through their work. The Big Lottery Fund, Comic Relief and the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation are investing £5.3m to support three projects (in Coventry, Hartlepool and Norwich) which are testing early and preventative action approaches in different areas of public service to develop a better case for early action amongst commissioners and funders.

The EANF learning and evaluation contract is being delivered by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University. It is designed to help grant holders and the EANF steering group members identify what has worked well and why in local approaches to early action and preventative services, so that successful approaches can be scaled or replicated. As part of this process the Evaluation Team is facilitating regular learning events for funded projects to come together,

discuss progress with their project and gain new insights that will support them in their delivery. The first learning event, in September 2017, focussed on *small n approaches to attributing impact.* This insight report summarises the key learning to have emerged from the event.

Background: why look at small n approaches to attributing impact?

At the end of the first year of the evaluation we produced a learning report on 'evidence and data' which discussed how the Early Action projects, and broader preventative initiatives, face a number of challenges collecting appropriate evidence and data to demonstrate distance travelled towards their goals in the short term, and overall success in achieving them in the longer term. The report highlighted the attribution of cause and effect as a particular challenge for the Early Action projects and suggested that, despite the emphasis given to advanced quantitative approaches (such as RCTs) in much of the literature, qualitative or theory based approaches to understanding impact may be more appropriate and achievable for the Early Action projects.

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In response to the findings of this report and the support needs expressed by the projects themselves, the learning event in September 2017 provided an introduction to small n approaches to impact, focussing on one particular approach: contribution analysis.

Small n approaches to attributing impact: an overview

What is a small n approach?

The 'n' in small n refers to the number of cases or units of analysis for which data are available. Whereas large n evaluations will use tests of statistical significance between outcomes in 'treatment' (policy-on) and 'comparison' (policy-off) groups, small n approaches employ mixed qualitative-quantitative research and analysis strategies to unpick cause and effect.

When should they be used?

Small n approaches might be appropriate in a number of circumstances relevant to an early action project:

- When it is not possible to collect or analyse data on a significant number of service users.
- When comparator data is not readily available.
- When the beneficiaries of an intervention may have benefited from a range of different interventions within a complex service system.
- When evaluation budgets and resources, including organisation capacity and capability, prevent a large enough sample, and/or comparison group, to be established.

A major advantage of small n approaches compared to large n approaches is their ability to aid the development of a 'story' about your impact by combining evidence from different methods and data sources.

These stories can then be shared with key stakeholders as part of a disucssion about the likely impacts of the work you are doing.

What types of approach exist? Group 1 and Group 2

- White and Phillips (2012) differentiate between group 1 and group 2 approaches to small n evaluation:

- Group 1 approaches explicitly set out to identify the causes of observed effects with a view to establishing beyond reasonable doubt how certain outcomes occurred.

  Group 2 approaches are less explicit in their efforts to establish cause and effect, focussing instead on identifying the factors that are perceived to have been important in producing outcome change.

A common feature of both types of approach is that they are based on in-depth examination of a particular intervention and investigate the causal hypotheses upon which they are founded. In many examples a project or programme's theory or theories of change provide a starting point for data collection and analysis.

An overview of different methods associated with group 1 and group two approaches is provided below.

Group 1 Approaches	Group 2 Approaches
Realist Evaluation	Most Significant Change (MSC)
General Elimination Methodology (GEM) (aka the Modus Operandi Method)	Success Case Method
Process Tracing	Outcome Mapping
Contribution Analysis	Method for Impact Assessment of Programmes and Projects (MAPP)

Source: adapted from White, H & Phillips, D (2012). Addressing attribution of cause and effect in small n impact evaluations: towards an integrated framework. International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie)

In focus: contribution analysis

Contribution analysis compares an intervention's theory of change with the weight of evidence collected to draw robust and plausible conclusions about the contribution it has made to the outcomes that have occurred. It seeks to develop a 'contribution story' that builds up evidence about the contribution made by an intervention alongside the potential influence of other factors on an outcome.

A plausible link between an intervention and an outcome can be said to have been made if:

- There is a well-reasoned theory of change.
- The activities associated with the intervention have been delivered as described in the theory of change.
- The chain of anticipated results are demonstrated to have occurred.
- Other influencing factors, and any difference they have made to the outcome, are fully recognised.

In the case of complex interventions, or interventions in complex systems, where there multiple or simultaneous causal strands, multiple contribution stories can be developed and brought together within a general theory of change that summarises them all.

There are seven iterative methodological steps involved in building a contribution story:

1 Set-out the cause and effect questions that need to be addressed.

2 Develop a well-reasoned theory of change that identifies potential influencing factors and outlines the different links in the theory of change and the risks and assumptions associated with them.

3 Gather existing evidence for the theory of change, focussing on a) observed results, b) each link in the results chain and, c) other influencing factors.

4 Assemble the contribution story and assess its plausibility. This should: state whether the intervention was implemented as planned; discuss the role of external factors; and say whether or not the expected results occurred as described in the theory of change.

5 Identify any additional evidence that reinforces or (disconfirms) the credibility of the contribution story.

6 Revise and strengthen the contribution story (if appropriate).

7 In complex settings (and systems), assemble and assess the complex contribution story.

Source: adapted from Mayne, J. (2011) Contribution analysis: addressing cause and effect, in K. Forss, M. Marra and R. Schwartz (eds.) Evaluating the Complex. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

How might the EANF projects apply these approaches in practice?

The general view of the EANF projects that attended the learning event was that contribution analysis could be a helpful addition to their existing evaluation approaches rather than an alternative. All three projects have well developed theories of change for their interventions and it was felt that contribution analysis could help bring these theories of change to life and enable them to become more of a focus for their evaluation activity.

As a start point we recommend that projects interested in undertaking a contribution analysis take the following steps:

1 If you have not already done so, revisit your theory of change: does it still accurately reflect the work you are doing and the outcomes you are observing?

2 Looking at your theory of change in detail, focus on the causal links and mechanisms that you think are most important for the outcomes you hope to achieve. Start with one or two of the most important outcomes so not to become overwhelmed by the task.

3 What does the evaluation evidence you have collected so far, and any wider evidence that has informed your theory of change, tell you about the plausibility that your intervention has led to changes in this outcome? Ask yourselves what else in the system or service area you are working in could have caused this change?

4 See if you can use this evidence and your reflections to develop a contribution 'story' about this outcome and test this story on some of your key stakeholders (including service users).

5 If you have any gaps in your evidence, and/or think you need to strengthen your contribution story, gather some more data, and then revise it.

Resources

You may find the following resources helpful if you want to learn more about small n approaches to attributing impact:

- The International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) published this helpful review of small n approaches in 2012. It includes more detail about the different group 1 and group 2 approaches

- The 'Better Evaluation' website provides a helpful overview of contribution analysis and links to a range of other resources.

- The work of John Mayne has been particularly influential in the development of contribution analysis. Key references include:

  - Mayne, J. (2001). Addressing attribution through contribution analysis: using performance measures sensibly. Canadian Journal of Programme Evaluation, 16: 1–24.

  - Mayne, J. (2003) Reporting on Outcomes: Setting Performance Expectations and Telling Performance Stories. Office of the Auditor General of Canada.

  - Mayne, J. (2011) Contribution analysis: addressing cause and effect, in K. Forss, M. Marra and R. Schwartz (eds.) Evaluating the Complex. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

- This special issue of the journal Evaluation also focusses on contribution analysis.

Contact

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