6 Research for specific purposes

a   Needs assessments

Voluntary and community groups use needs assessments to explore or prove specific needs and to identify areas of unmet need within their target groups. An organisation may have some anecdotal evidence of the need for their existence and their services but have no substantiated evidence. Other organisations may be aware of needs within the communities they service but they may not know what those specific needs are, or how they should be met. Research can play a role in both instances by helping to identify, clarify, measure and prove need whilst also identifying relevant and appropriate ways of meeting these needs.

Mapping existing services in the locality will provide information on unmet needs when incorporated into the needs assessment. Finding out what provision and services already exist is crucial for building partnerships, signposting and ensuring your organisation is not duplicating other services.

When to conduct a needs assessment?
Organisations conduct needs assessments at various stages of development.

- **In the start up phase of your organisation you will need to provide evidence of the need for your organisation and its activities to potential funders, the local communities you seek to serve and to local authorities. A needs assessment will also contribute to ensuring the activities you are developing will be taken up and are relevant and appropriate.**

- **Do your existing services meet the needs of only one particular group of people, excluding other groups? Are your existing services or areas of work still relevant or are they out of touch? Are there any barriers to accessing services? If any of these questions are relevant, your organisation may not have kept in touch with the communities it serves. A needs assessment will help to establish new needs your organisation ought to be aware of.**

Example

Bread and Roses, a new organisation, gained funding to deliver a service to homeless people in Lewisham. Part of the funding was earmarked to identify what type of homelessness service was needed in the area. The organisation conducted 50 interviews with homeless people across the borough. The research established that there was a need among those interviewed for more information and advice services. There was also a need for more accommodation and they wanted a better service from Lewisham Council. In response Bread and Roses set up their own advice and information service in South Lewisham, an area where there were few services for homeless people, but a significant number of homeless people. They also established a homelessness forum, bringing together all agencies working in homelessness in the borough. This helped to deliver a more co-ordinated service in Lewisham.

As part of the research they compiled a directory of existing services, which ensured their new service was not duplicating others, created a useful signposting tool and helped to increase the take up of existing services.

b   Evaluation

Evaluation entails finding out how your services are used and viewed and using what you find out to plan, develop and improve services. The three basic questions an evaluation sets out to answer are

- **what are we achieving?**

- **are we doing things competently?**

- **what effects are we having?**

Evaluation provides clear feedback to everyone involved in the organisation: users, staff, management, funders and the media.

Overview of process
The steps for an evaluation are much like those for any research project:

- **agree who the evaluation is for**

- **plan the starting points of the evaluation**

- **agree what information is needed and how to collect it; establish baseline information**

- **review the data and analyse what the information shows**

- **tell people the results**

- **evaluate the evaluation – what would you do differently next time? Was any data missing or hard to obtain? Could it be made more user-friendly?**

Who it's for
The first stage of an evaluation is to establish who and what the evaluation is for, as this will guide how it is to be carried out. Is it for internal use only? Or will it be used externally, in an annual report or as part of a progress report? How will its findings feed into the planning process? Will your organisation carry it out itself, use a facilitator to help them or employ a consultant to carry it out for them?

Starting points
It is vital to have

- **clear and realistic goals for the project or service being evaluated. These need to be defined from the outset and have measurable objectives.**

- **enough time and money for the evaluation. The cost of an evaluation is linked to the size of the project. Allow about 5-10% of the annual budget for an ongoing service and up to 25% of the budget for a pilot scheme.**

- **a self–critical approach and a willingness to change the way the service is delivered, acting on the results of the evaluation.**

As with other types of research project, think carefully about the questions you want your evaluation to answer. You are unlikely to be able to evaluate every aspect of your service. Here are some common questions asked in an evaluation. We have given the technical names of each kind of evaluation but more important is selecting the purpose that is most appropriate for you.

Are we doing it right? How can we improve service delivery? How are our programmes and policies designed and implemented? How do they relate to our aims and objectives? This includes looking at structure, decision-making, working relations and is known as a *process evaluation*.
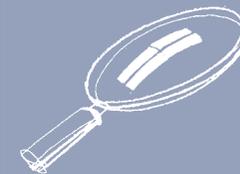
While we are carrying out our work, how can we learn from experience and adjust the work accordingly? Which strategy works best? This is known as a *formative evaluation*.

In the end, what did and did not work and why? What improvements could be made? An evaluation carried out the end of a project, asking about the overall picture, is known as a *summative evaluation*.

What did we achieve? What outcomes and culture changes? What changes in behaviour were triggered? These questions are referred to as an *impact evaluation*.

How does the organisation itself work? An organisational evaluation.

You will also find these concepts and questions useful.

What goes into the provision of service/ activity? What resources (staff, skills, knowledge, budgets, equipment and the influences of policy or legislation) are needed to formulate and execute a policy, programme or project? These are *inputs*.

Did the service meet its specified objectives and agreed targets? Specific products of an organisation e.g. advice sessions provided, crèches held, information sheets produced are *outputs*.

What happened as a result of the outputs? For example how many more people were able to claim benefits, more people able to seek work, improved housing conditions? These are *outcomes*.

Many funders expect some kind of outcome monitoring, a way of measuring intermediate or long-term outcomes. Outcome measurement is the assessment of the changes in the participants' knowledge, attitudes, values, skills, behaviour condition or status. The overall goal is to determine that a programme or service has made a difference. Some voluntary groups feel that funders may be over-reliant on this type of information, especially when outcomes are hard to demonstrate. However, since outcome evaluation is often required it is wise to be prepared to illustrate your project's outcomes.