

GHK's FRASER BATTYE looks at the issues around collecting and presenting evidence to demonstrate impact.



“We know that what we do works... we just can't prove it.”

I've been evaluating social policies and programmes at GHK for the last ten years. If I had a pound for each time the line above has been said to me, I would be writing this from somewhere more exotic than an office in Birmingham.

More often than not, it is smaller third sector organisations that are in this position. They see the value of their work; they 'know' the difference it makes; and yet, they can't prove it. They may have some evidence – often case studies of individual beneficiaries – but struggle to meet more stringent requirements (around the question of value for money for example).

This lack of evidence is by no means exclusive to small organisations – yet there are factors which make it that bit harder for them. As readers of Update will well know, they include:

The trade-off between delivering services and measuring them

There is an old saying: 'you can't fatten a pig by weighing it'. For smaller organisations this is often the issue: time spent gathering evidence and reporting on it is time spent not delivering services. As well as the issue of time and capacity, the fact is that most staff and volunteers did not get involved in the organisation because they were motivated to produce good data.

Increasing competition for resources

In the last decade there has been a huge expansion of the third sector's delivery of public services. Current policy suggests continuation of this. But, despite commitments to transition and other funding, cuts to public spending mean less funding. Moreover, grants that many organisations rely on are coming to an end. There is increased competition for access to more limited resources.

An emphasis on commissioning

The public sector is increasingly the commissioner of services rather than the provider of grant funding. Commissioning needs competition amongst providers; it also needs evidence. It is tempting for the professional evaluator to conclude that evidence will bring about the best of all worlds: that commissioners will have enough evidence to identify and commission the delivery of outcomes; that organisations with stronger evidence will attract funding.

Expecting evidence alone to achieve this would be naive – funders' decisions are rarely purely evidence-based and smaller organisations frequently struggle to know about and respond to tendering opportunities. Yet it is safe to conclude that organisations that can prove the value of their services as a matter of routine are better placed than those who cannot.



There are no easy solutions, but for small organisations, GHK recommends being clear about the difference you want to make – picking a few key pieces of information and collecting them well. A conversation with funders can be useful here. For funders we recommend providing specialist support to organisations as part of your programme.

GHK's work with Living Well West Midlands showed how this supportive approach can work well, and our work for Children England, *Thinking Small When Thinking Big*, provides practical examples of how smaller organisations can be supported within commissioning arrangements. **U**

■ Living Well West Midlands: www.livingwellwestmidlands.org | Children England, *Thinking Small When Thinking Big*: www.childrenengland.org.uk/reports/573

Fraser Battye is a Principal at GHK and is leading two workshops on evaluation and economic analysis at BVSC, on 18 and 24 May.

GHK provides a range of research and consulting services; we specialise in evaluation.

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