EVALUATION PAST PRESENT AND FUTURE

1 September 2015

To celebrate our 25th birthday, NCVO Charities Evaluation Services’ Sally Cupitt and Rowan Boase reflect on the last 25 years of evaluation in the UK voluntary sector, and present a vision for the next quarter of a century.

Do you remember 1990? Cast your mind back, if you can. Nelson Mandela walked out of prison, the Cold War was coming to an end and Margaret Thatcher resigned. And there were concerns about the state of the voluntary sector and calls for it to be more efficient and business-like. Charities Evaluation Services (CES) was set up to improve the sector’s ability to monitor and evaluate itself while maintaining its distinctive values.

The twenty-five years since then have seen a lot of change. Voluntary and community sector organisations are now seen as partners in delivering public services, the culture of accountability is well-established and there is a drive to place outcomes and impact at the heart of the sector. Since 1990, CES has trained tens of thousands of organisations and disseminated messages through a range of publications. We have used our deep knowledge of the sector to develop accessible tools and approaches. We have also carried out hundreds of independent evaluations, using the practical learning from these to inform how we work with our clients and to develop our information and training.

We have changed too. Following our merger with NCVO last year, we are now NCVO Charities Evaluation Services – different, stronger, but very much still here and with the same passion. As we blow out the candles on our 25th birthday cake, we reflect on what has been learned over our first quarter of a century and look ahead to the next 25 years. We’ll take a whirlwind tour of CES’ history, share some of our most useful learning, and set out where we think the sector needs to go next.

So help yourself to a piece of birthday cake, take a journey into CES’ memory, and join us as we set out to support voluntary organisations in the next 25 years to achieve even more.

The story so far

1. The early 1990s: becoming more accountable

In the early 1990s, many voluntary sector organisations were losing their core funding in the new contract economy and needed to give a better account of themselves. Before then, they weren’t exposed to much public scrutiny and there was little demand on organisations to monitor their performance, beyond providing numbers of people who came through the door. Where
evaluations were carried out, they were often commissioned by funders and were carried out by external evaluators. Concerns were expressed about moves to ‘police’ the sector and, with little internal ownership of evaluations and their findings, the result was that reports could be found gathering dust in filing cabinets. We needed to change this – to develop an understanding of how monitoring and evaluation could benefit organisations themselves and their users.

CES’ focus on self-evaluation meant that organisations themselves would need to gain the skills and the tools to assess their own achievements and to learn through the process. Our first step was to develop practical methods that could be integrated into everyday work routines. We trained around a cycle of evaluation, with a simple five-step approach that emphasised clarity about organisational aims, based on an understanding of the needs of users, and getting agreement at the start about the information that was important to collect. We emphasised the potential of evaluation as a reflective process, delivering learning, and being an important part of organisational management.

We had our roots both in the voluntary sector and in a broader evaluation culture, so we were in a unique position to translate and transmit technical skills to organisations of all sizes. Now that CES’ models and some of the basic concepts, techniques and tools have been so widely taken up, it’s difficult to remember how new this all was at the time. The simple tool that made a real difference from the late 1990s, and that we still use in some of our training today, is the CES planning triangle, which helped teams to take their first steps into outcomes thinking. With aims clear, outcomes could then be identified and indicators selected, to form the basis of a monitoring and evaluation plan.

The CES planning triangle encouraged organisations to plan backwards from planned aims – the difference they wanted to make. In the early days of developing CES’ training, Sally Cupitt remembers people really struggling with the distinction between outputs and outcomes; this is a challenge that remains for some.

One development was that a new evaluation partnership emerged between our external evaluators and programme staff, a pragmatic and effective response to limited budgets. We began to work with managers and frontline staff at the start, helping to put in place a sound monitoring framework and systems. This remains a key component of our work today.
2. Mid-1990s to early 2000s: it’s the difference you make that counts

CES did early work with infrastructure organisations in 2001 and 2002 on developing shared measurement tools and outcomes monitoring systems. There were also important wider developments at the time; there was pioneering work on measuring outcomes by alcohol and homelessness agencies, with the development of tools such as the SOUL record and the Outcomes Star. By the mid-1990s, information about outcomes had become part of Charity Commission guidance and regulatory requirements and in 2006 the Office of the Third Sector increased the focus on benefits for users in its third sector Action Plan.

In 1997, CES produced the first edition of PQASSO, the first quality system designed specifically by the voluntary sector for the sector, destined to become the sector’s leading quality system, with a dedicated quality area on monitoring and evaluation. The focus on outcomes in the sector was such that by the second edition of PQASSO we made sure that this was reflected throughout the standards, and with a specific quality area for organisational results.

We worked with high-profile funders to develop outcomes approaches. Our booklet, Your Project and its Outcomes, written for the then Community Fund (now BIG) in 2003, had a print run of 50,000, with a new edition later developed for the Big Lottery Fund. This document is still well read today. The CES National Outcomes Programme, which ran from 2003 to 2009, cascaded an outcomes approach throughout the nine England regions to frontline organisations. As the recession hit the sector, we urged organisations to use an outcomes approach to be more needs-led, to be more accountable and credible and to build relationships with funders and commissioners.

But for many organisations there were real challenges in developing effective outcomes monitoring systems, and there was some resistance to what was seen as an additional organisational burden. While we supported organisations to design simple data collection tools, we also encouraged them to consider off-the-peg tools, but only where they fitted well with the work they were doing and their user group, with their identified outcomes and indicators, and with their underlying values and ways of working. There was also an emerging interest in using interactive, creative tools for working with children and young people and other specific groups and participatory methods, more commonly used at the time by international NGOs. Community organisations in particular started using visual evaluation methods, such as photos and video diaries, to provide richer evaluation evidence.

3. Around 2004 to 2010: ‘monitoring themselves to death’

As the new millennium progressed and the sector became increasingly involved in delivering public services, performance management and performance improvement were high on the agenda. CES was able to take the message about outcomes further when we had government funding for the Performance Hub and the National Performance Programme from 2005 to
2011, increasing our reach and our capacity to work in a more direct way with infrastructure organisations.

Some organisations found themselves accountable to a range of different regulatory bodies and funders with different information demands. In 2008, we reported back to government on the findings from what was the first large-scale research study into monitoring and evaluation in the UK voluntary sector (Accountability and Learning, Ellis, 2008). One key recommendation was that monitoring should be proportionate, taking into account the level of funding, and the size and resources of the funded organisation. People had told us that they were ‘monitoring themselves to death’, in many cases unable to use the data they were generating because so much time was spent collecting it. We subsequently worked with the National Audit Office on its 2009 guidance; this message about the need for monitoring and evaluation to be proportionate has since been taken up more widely as a funding principle, and is currently urged by the Inspiring Impact initiative of which we are a part.

Our training to funders and commissioners, and the training and capacity building we do for their grantees is an important part of our work. Our 2001 publication Does Your Money Make a Difference? (now updated) set out monitoring and evaluation principles for funders and was republished as a second edition in 2010, stressing the importance of proportionality, realistic monitoring and evaluation budgets, and the need to develop sector skills to provide better evidence, and partnership in learning. One of the projects that we developed jointly with partners such as Charities Aid Foundation and the Association of Charitable Foundations was www.jargonbusters.org.uk so that funders and funded could speak the same simple and accessible language.

By 2008, we had found that self-evaluation was increasing in currency and legitimacy. New software was providing opportunities for improved data analysis and reporting, with potential time savings and improved ease of reporting. However, we also posted warnings about the quality of evidence that was being provided. It was clear that there was a lot of work still to be done to build evaluation skills and improve data management in the sector.

4. Around 2010 to 2015: emphasis on social value

As we reached the end of the 2000s, the public and voluntary sectors were increasingly affected by the pressure of tighter budgets. This brought with it a new emphasis on demonstrating economic measures of value, the government leading with messages about the need for both the public and voluntary sectors to demonstrate both social benefits and savings for the public purse.

Earlier there had been an interest in social audit, and by the early 2000s there was a new methodology in town; social return on investment (SROI), which puts a monetary value on the social and environmental benefits of an organisation relative to a given amount of investment. Initially quite niche, SROI really came to the fore in 2008-11 with the Cabinet-Office-funded
Measuring Social Value programme, of which we were a part, which aimed to make SROI accessible to voluntary sector organisations.

We welcomed the value that SROI placed on ‘softer’ social outcomes, and its emphasis on stakeholder involvement. But we have always been careful to advise caution where necessary, ensuring that organisations are aware of the strengths and limitations of any approach. For example, with SROI, the method was difficult to apply across some of the sector’s work, such as campaigning or infrastructure bodies. We also had concerns that the results of SROIs should not be used to make comparisons – attractive for funders as it had potential as a tool to assess value for money. SROI is a useful addition to the evaluation toolbox, but our focus remains on supporting organisations to evidence their outcomes, the foundation on which more technical evaluation approaches, such as SROI, must rest.

One concern that we raised in our publications and training was that the focus on outcomes should not exclude attention to process – indeed that it was important to track how projects and programmes were implemented, how things were done and the overall context, if there were to be any real understanding about what worked, for whom, and how and why outcomes were achieved.

One approach that is gaining ground is theory of change, which shows the links between activities and short-term change, steps along the way and longer-term outcomes, connecting to a bigger picture of social change. This had been introduced to the UK from America in the late 1990s. The CES planning triangle was a simple, early theory of change which had become popularised through our training and publications, but our 2008 research report advocated a more developed use of theory of change as a tool for some organisations to plan for and to track outcomes and impact.

A fully-developed theory of change approach remains complex and can be time-consuming, but we are working with more and more organisations to use the model; we are sure that this ‘sharp edge’ of evaluation practice will lead the sector as a whole towards a more strategic, reflective approach and better evidence.

**The present day: what we’ve learned**

At the age of 25, CES is now a grown-up organisation. We have learned and reflected over the years and would like to take the opportunity to share eight key messages with you.

**1. Slow down and plan**

It is ever the tendency for organisations new to evaluation to rush straight to collecting data. Our message is to slow down and recognise that planning is an essential first stage in getting good quality evidence about the difference you are making. You need to step back and bring internal and external stakeholders into the process of reviewing your aims, being clear about outcomes,
what you are going to measure and how. Planning tools such as our CES planning triangle, a logic model, or theory of change can be a helpful way to start.

Recognise that bringing in an outcomes approach can involve massive culture change and can sometimes take a number of years. It takes time to set up new systems, first of all building engagement from management and other stakeholders. Often there are other skills gaps to be addressed too, for example around IT and data management. For some established organisations, introducing outcomes and impact thinking can involve radically changing how they think about themselves, their work and their clients.

2. Be realistic

Quite commonly funders still ask for too much information and voluntary organisations themselves may be over-ambitious, not appreciating the amount of work involved. The key is to prioritise the most important outcomes and the information that will be most helpful to evidence whether change occurred. Sometimes there are choices to be made about the rigour of the evidence you might like in an ideal world, and what is most useful to meet your own needs and those of your funders within your resource limitations.

3. Horses for courses

When you step back to plan, there are pragmatic decisions to be made, for example, about the information needed, about priorities, what can be done with the resources and skills available. This process should lead your choice of methods. One organisation we worked with had been advised to collect ‘before and after’ data on all the one-off calls to its advice helpline. But some calls were only 10 minutes long – so the process was irritating for the caller, excruciating for the adviser, and unlikely to provide meaningful outcomes data. Make sure you choose methods that answer your evaluation questions and are appropriate for the intervention.

4. Be creative and innovative

Don’t be afraid to think creatively about how to collect data and how to engage with your users and other stakeholders. There is now a plethora of useful and available resources that will suggest ways you can engage people and gather valuable evidence to supplement more standard methodologies. Evaluation should also be seen as a useful partner to piloting and developing innovative practice and disseminating their results.

5. Measure the right level of change

Gradually a common language is being built in the sector. Make sure you have a shared understanding throughout your organisation and with your funders and commissioners about what you mean by the terminology. The technical distinction between ‘outcomes’ and ‘impact’ is really worth knowing about as these different levels of change can require different forms of evaluation.
Whereas ‘outcomes’ are direct changes resulting from your work, ‘impact’ is the wider, longer-term change that you can link back to your own services, campaigning or other intervention.

Measuring true impact can be complex, requiring rigorous methods and analysis, and it may not be appropriate or realistic for your organisation. Simply measuring outcomes that are more likely to be the direct result of your work and less influenced by other factors may be all you need to do.

6. Make links between outcomes and your work

Get the best evidence you can to make a strong link between your intervention and the outcomes and longer-term change. In the last few years, the voluntary sector has been asked to consider the importance of experimental or ‘scientific’ methods, such as randomised control trials. RCTs are regarded by some as providing the best way of measuring impact and establishing causality; however, they are still rare in the sector as they involve rigorous statistical analysis and can be time-consuming and costly to carry out. It’s well worth knowing about scientific methods, but there are also qualitative ways of making a causal link, working from a theory of change, testing out alternative explanations of why change happened and submitting your data to careful analysis.

7. Engage with others

Bring internal and external stakeholders into the process; they are your partners in evaluation. All staff and volunteers need to understand the part they play; it’s important for them to understand how monitoring and evaluation will help their own work and benefit their users. They may have to learn new skills and adjust how they work, so they should be involved early on. Your evaluation planning will be better for their involvement.

It’s also valuable to involve wider stakeholder groups, particularly in the planning stage and when you are thinking about outcomes. Decide whether users will be your full collaborators or how they might be otherwise involved in setting outcomes and planning and carrying out data collection. Remember to share your findings, with the people who have given the data, and the people who have collected it. This is respectful, increases the chance of their producing data again in future, and it enables staff to use the findings in their own work.

8. Learn from both failure and success

Make sure that your enquiry remains open and that you proactively recognise and report bad news as well as good – it will be a sign of learning. It’s enormously helpful that positive evaluation findings can be used for PR, but we need to get to the situation where organisations trust enough to share learning from failure as well as success. Measurement of social value can sometimes set a contrary message as it emphasises positive change; developments such as payment by results may also work against a learning culture. But it’s important to learn from the barriers to change and any negative outcomes as this can only help you to improve what you do.
The future: our vision

The vision that has supported CES is that of a stronger sector, better meeting needs and, indeed, we have seen how organisations have used findings from their monitoring and evaluation to improve what they do, highlight their achievements and demonstrate their value. New challenges are emerging all the time and there is a lot more work to be done over the next 25 years. We intend to continue in the front line, taking a lead in voluntary sector evaluation over the coming years.

We invite you to share in our vision for the future, captured here in eight key points. We look forward to working closely with you again as partners in the development of monitoring and evaluation to make the voluntary sector the best it can be.

1. Outcomes and impact are central

The difference organisations want to make will be evident in plans and strategy. Trustees, staff and volunteers will all be able to tell people clearly about their organisational or project outcomes and impact and know how their work contributes to it. Known outcomes will guide the work with users and partners, and clients and funders will buy in to them. Monitoring and evaluation activities will be an integral part of both planning and the work itself.

2. The smallest organisations can report their outcomes

Smaller organisations will not be forgotten in our drive to understand the latest cutting-edge approaches and tools. Most of our sector is made up of small organisations, with over three-quarters having an annual income of £100,000 and almost half with an income of less than £10,000. They will be able to access the right sort of support, including free and online resources, to develop simple but effective monitoring and evaluation systems. The information they provide will be set at a realistic and appropriate level, building on the data they collect in their day to day management. They and their funders will be able to see how their work contributes to wider social outcomes.

3. Real-time data drives continuous development

Final evaluation reports at the end of a project will continue to be useful, but project managers will increasingly be able to speed up the planning-monitoring-evaluation-reflection learning cycle to provide more responsive project and service development and improvement. Technology will allow easier access to real-time data, allowing internal and external evaluators to be more agile and work in greater partnership with managers, providing shorter, more regular reports. The formative role

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1 NCVO Almanac, 2015
of evaluation will be embraced, and will become central, with time and resources allowed for reflective decision making.

4. The sector shares good practice and learning

The voluntary sector will continue to develop its monitoring and evaluation practice and learn from evaluation findings. There will be good quality research about what works in voluntary sector monitoring and evaluation practice. Evaluators and others providing technical support will learn from each other, developing a common pool of knowledge.

There will be more consistent and shared good practice in the sector more widely. This sharing and learning culture will be more developed as sub-sectors share and learn from peer-to-peer to help face challenges and barriers. Measurement tools in the sector will continue to be developed jointly where appropriate and shared by organisations working towards similar goals.

Voluntary sector organisations will be able to easily access reports, validated findings and open data, for example from NPC’s Data Labs. They will use these to substantiate their own theories of change, which will reduce the need for them to carry out costly and complex primary research themselves. Evaluation findings will stimulate funding of innovative projects and programmes as well as established good practice.

5. Data collection and outcomes reporting are seen as core skills

Outcomes-focused monitoring and evaluation will be built into job descriptions and regarded as a core activity. The sector will develop the standard of its outcome and impact measurement by inducting and training its staff and volunteers routinely in its systems and in the skills needed to perform essential tasks. Organisations will know how to access external technical help.

6. Voluntary organisations make the best use of methodologies

Organisations and their funders will have enough information about the benefits and implications of different evaluation methods to choose appropriately in the light of the work being carried out, information needs and available resources and skills. There will be more understanding about when economic evaluation and the most rigorous methods of measuring impact are appropriate and useful, and about the pragmatic considerations involved in using scientific methods. Funders, evaluators and organisations themselves will be clear about when there will be added value from using more technical methods. In the drive for increasing rigour, the sector will not lose what it has gained in the development of self-evaluation, for the learning of lessons, and the use of findings for change and improvement.
7. Qualitative methods are sharper

Organisations will get better quality data as the sector becomes increasingly skilled in using surveys, focus groups, interviews and other qualitative methods. There will also be more rigour in analysing and interpreting data. In particular organisations will be able to use qualitative methods effectively to establish attribution, providing a robust method of measuring impact. The use of theory of change will introduce a more reflective way of thinking about cause and effect, allowing those implementing projects and services to test out assumptions about what will work and to explore evidence for and against alternative explanations for change.

8. Funders and commissioners provide support to self-evaluation

There will be a greater understanding by funders and commissioners of outcomes and impact, and they will place value on working collaboratively with the organisations they fund to achieve their aims. Demands for information will have regard to the size of organisation, the nature of the intervention and the funding provided. Monitoring and evaluation will be realistically funded, recognising the time and resources required for good quality data collection; funding for project evaluation will recognise the principle of a budget of between 5 per cent and 10 per cent of overall project costs. Funders and commissioners will also support their funded organisations to build their self-evaluation practice, actively encouraging the sharing of good practice and learning.

Thank you: here’s to the next 25 years

Before we end, we urge you to look for support when you are breaking new ground. There are lots of great free resources available that can guide you and stop you from having to reinvent the wheel. Try www.ces-vol.org.uk and www.inspiringimpact.org for a start. If you have a budget, even a day of consultancy support can mean avoiding weeks of frustration.

While we don’t know exactly what the next 25 years will look like, we do know that CES will continue to work with voluntary organisations and their funders, big and small, tackling challenges and using our trusted approaches but also new techniques where useful, all to help you to make a bigger difference for the causes you serve.

We would like to raise a glass to all those we have worked with over the last 25 years – funders and commissioners, government departments, voluntary organisations and their users. The future is always unknown, but the need for evaluation – learning about how you are doing and the difference you are making – won’t be going away. Thanks for being part of the journey so far and here’s to the next 25 years.