Evaluating Transform Ageing

What we've learnt about learning

Contents

Evaluating complex and innovative programmes

In this paper we explore how combining developmental and theory-based evaluation approaches can provide space for learning and accountability in innovative programmes.

It draws on our experience in Transform Ageing and makes recommendations for anyone interested in what role learning can play when addressing complex challenges or in innovative programmes.[1]

About us

Launched in 2017, Transform Ageing aims to improve people's experience of ageing. It is an innovative programme that brings together co-design and social entrepreneurship to create new, people-centred solutions that better support the needs and aspirations of people in later life.

Funded by the Big Lottery Fund, it is led by Design Council, alongside UnLtd (the Foundation for Social Entrepreneurs), the South West Academic Health Science Network (SW AHSN), and the Centre for Ageing Better. Running in Cornwall, Devon, and Somerset, it is supported locally by delivery organisations, overseen by a Programme Governance Board, and delivered by teams drawn from across the partners.

Recognising that those with first-hand experience provide a legitimate understanding and authentic insight, in 2017 the programme brought together groups of people in later life, their friends, families and carers, social entrepreneurs and public-sector leaders. Transform Ageing collaborated with them to create six design briefs.

When we set out, we didn't know what ideas this process would develop, or how social entrepreneurs would respond to them. We knew there would be challenges unique to the three geographical areas, but we didn't know how that would affect the delivery of the programme. This raised challenges for how to evaluate the programme. We knew we would have to be flexible to allow ideas to emerge, be reflective about how it's working, and be iterative so that we could change our course as things developed. At the same time, we also wanted to be able to demonstrate how the programme has been able to contribute to and drive change.

Our solution: combine a theory-based evaluation approach and developmental evaluation. Bringing these two approaches together has enabled programme staff to use real-time learning to understand the complexity Transform Ageing operates in. As well as providing a balance between accountability and learning, it has empowered those involved to deal with change and identify strategic priorities. In this paper we reflect on our approach, how it has worked in practice, and what we've learned as a result.

To be able to take an innovative approach while also having an evaluation that prioritises learning and accountability equally, requires the support of the programme funder. Big Lottery Fund recognises the value that it adds to the programme. This is reflected in how we are reporting on the programme. Rather than write an interim report and a final evaluation

[1] To understand what we mean by complexity and innovation, see the Glossary of Transform Ageing below.

which tries to accommodate everything we have learned, we will be writing a series of ten papers throughout the programme. Each of these will focus on a particular area of the programme, allowing more space for reflection. Alongside what we have learned as an evaluation team, we also reflect on the role funders can play in supporting innovative solutions to complex problems.

Based on our experience, we think that there are some useful questions for funders and programme partners to consider when designing evaluations for innovative programme, like Transform Ageing:

1. What scope is there to make changes to the evaluation during the programme and who would need to be involved?

2. What does using an innovative approach mean for the programme's objectives, reporting, and timelines?

3. How will learning be documented and who should it be shared with?

4. How can learning activities be integrated with other programme activities, e.g. team meetings?

5. How could evaluation get in the way of innovation and what can we put in place to avoid this

Glossary of Transform Ageing

Collective Impact Framework (CIF) Team

As a collaboration between multiple partners, Transform Ageing brings together interdisciplinary teams from the programme partners. To capture learning and evaluate the impact of the programme, we have formed the Collective Impact Framework Team. We each undertake different parts of the evaluation activity depending on our organisation's expertise, but come together to plan, analyse, and report on what we learn. The evaluation design was a collaborative process across the partners and we wrote this paper together to reflect that.

The Delivery Organisations

To ensure the programme represents the areas in which it is being delivered, Volunteer Cornwall, Devon Communities Together, Community Council for Somerset, and Torbay Community Development Trust act as delivery organisations. They provide access to local networks (either entrepreneurial or health and care sector) and have connections to people in later life living in their local communities.

Programme Governance Board

The programme is overseen by a Programme Governance Board (PGB) that is comprised of representatives from each of the partners (Design Council, UnLtd, SW AHSN, and Centre for Ageing Better). As well as setting the strategic direction of the programme, the board is also accountable for the use of the grant across the programme.

Other teams

In the south-west, the Delivery Team is comprised of programme staff and award managers from three of the delivery partners, who work with the delivery organisations to find, fund, and support social entrepreneurs. Although it brings together staff from different organisations, it operates as a single team to drive the successful delivery of the programme.

'Marcomms' is the Marketing and Communication branch of the programme. Specialist staff from each of the partners works with the delivery organisations to reach out to potential applicants and promote the story of Transform Ageing.

More information about programme can be found here.

Complexity

Complex, or 'wicked' challenges have many elements which create unpredictable results when they interact.[2] Whilst building a rocket engine is complicated, following a predetermined process will produce the same results. Raising a child, or addressing the challenges of an ageing society, are complex; the results depend on the interaction of elements that are impossible to predict.

Innovation

Innovative solutions are in a state of continuous development and adaptation. Rather than just being about trying something new, they are designed to change in response to unpredictable environments.[3] As a result, they are particularly suited to addressing complex challenges.

[2] Jamie A. A. Gamble, A Developmental Evaluation Primer, (2008) [online], p. 14 (accessed 26 June 2018)

[3] ibid, p.15

Different approaches to evaluation

Designing an evaluation often involves finding a balance between accountability and learning.

Focussing on accountability allows us to understand what has happened and why. Far from being about finger pointing or attributing blame, it is a way of looking back over a programme or intervention to assess its outcomes, effectiveness and efficiency. It is often shaped by the relationship with a funder and as a result, there can be a pressure to focus more on what worked and celebrating success, rather than what could have been done differently.

A focus on learning allows insights to be gathered during a programme as it develops, creates space for reflection among programme staff, and gives them the information they need to make changes as they go. This approach is particularly suited to complex and innovative programmes where the outcomes may still be emerging and an ability to respond to change is needed.

It is tempting to see these two functions of evaluation sitting at opposite ends of a spectrum, with evaluation design trying to strike a balance between them. Our starting point was that both are important. We are accountable to the Big Lottery Fund, to each other as partners, to the delivery organisations, to the social entrepreneurs who we support, the people they support, and people in later life in the south-west – both those that have been actively involved in the

process and those that haven't. Being accountable means that we are able to provide evidence about how we have progressed against the programme's goals and point to why things did or did not work. At the same time, we are dealing with complex issues and testing out an innovative approach. It's also the first time Design Council, UnLtd, SW AHSN, and Centre for Ageing Better have worked together, so the ability to adapt and learn is important.
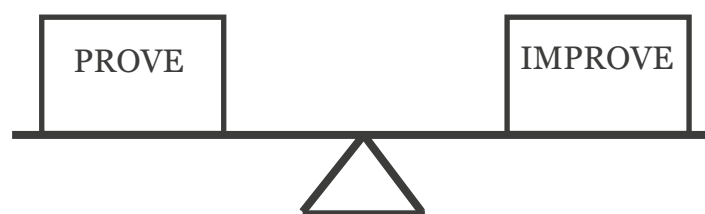
Theory-based and developmental evaluation

Anyone who has been involved in charitable activity in the last 20 years is likely to be familiar with developing and using a theory of change. A theory of change helps an organisation to articulate how an intervention, or set of interventions, contributes to an overarching goal and what changes along the way. Managers and trustees have used them to help reflect on the overall strategic direction of the organisation, funders have used them to help identify impact, and frontline staff have used them to organise their data collecting activities.

4 C. Heider, Facing off: Accountability and Learning – the Next Big Dichotomy in Evaluation?, [online], 2016 (accessed 6 June 2018)

5 B. Reeger, R. de Wildt-Liesveld, B. van Mierlo, and J. Bunders, 'Exploring ways to reconcile accountability and learning in the evaluation of niche experiments', Evaluation, Vol 22, Issue 1, pp. 6 – 28. Available from SageJournals (accessed 6 June 2018)

As useful as they are, they have also been criticised for presenting a linear model of cause and effect which struggle to capture the full complexity of the real world. By presenting a pathway which neatly links activities to results, they don't provide space for unexpected external factors or unanticipated outcomes.

Many of the challenges that society faces, such as environmental degradation, terrorism, and poverty are wicked problems, i.e. they are the result of many interconnected factors that seem impossible to solve.[6] When tackling problems like this, we need to think differently. In recognition of this, organisations are increasingly turning to innovative solutions; where both the destination and journey are to some degree unknown, with people with lived experience

of an issue often contributing to the design and delivery of the intervention. In these cases, being able to point at what has or hasn't worked at the end of a programme or intervention is of less value than being able to learn and reflect as the programme develops. Developmental evaluation emerged as a way to capture learning to be used in just this way.[7]

Developmental evaluation shifts the focus from accountability to learning. Rather than focusing on gathering information to build a complete picture through evidence, the focus moves to generating useful insights and evidence that can be used to iterate and adapt.

	Theory-based evaluation	Developmental evaluation
Description	• A way of organising evaluation activity and identifying what has or hasn't worked against pre-determined goals	• A way of capturing learning from evaluation activity in programmes with emerging outcomes
Useful when / for	• Producing generalisable findings across a wide landscape or long period. • Evidencing clear accountability • Appealing to funders and external authorities	• Both the goal and the journey are unknown. • Developing new measures and monitoring systems to support changing activities
Limitations	• Can create a fear of failure • Generally suited to providing learning after a programme has finished • Not suited to evaluating programmes with emergent outcomes	• Less robust evidence of accountability • As evaluation is embedded in the programme it requires additional resource
Role of the evaluator	• An apparently neutral observer who determines the design of the evaluation based on their perception of what is important	• A member of the team, actively involved in a project. Elucidates discussions with questions and info to facilitate evidence-led decision making.

[6] Jamie A. A. Gamble, A Developmental Evaluation Primer, (2008) [online], p. 14 (accessed 26 June 2018)
[7] Better Evaluation, 'Developmental Evaluation' [online] (accessed 26 June 2018)

Designing the evaluation

This section describes how we designed our integrated approach – a learning framework for learning and a theory of change for accountability. We will then look at how we draw the two strands together to form a complementary system.

How we developed our theory of change

We have developed a theory of change and an evaluation framework that sets out what success looks like and how we will know if our theory holds true. Each partner organisation is responsible for collecting different types of data, which will be brought together in the final evaluation. How we put the theory of change together:

Built the first theory of change: We brought together practitioners from across the programme to map out activities, barriers, and strategic objectives. We included some of the challenges that the programme would be addressing, including people living longer, health inequalities, and stretched health and social care budgets. This process helped us to piece together the context that Transform Ageing would be working in and draw out some early causal links and outcomes. From this we built our first theory of change.

Developed it with people in later life and public-sector leaders: In the first phase of the programme, we brought together social entrepreneurs, people in later life, and public-sector leaders to identify challenges. From these we designed innovation briefs for social entrepreneurs to respond to. After this, we reviewed the context map and considered what had changed or where emerging findings challenged our assumptions and logic.
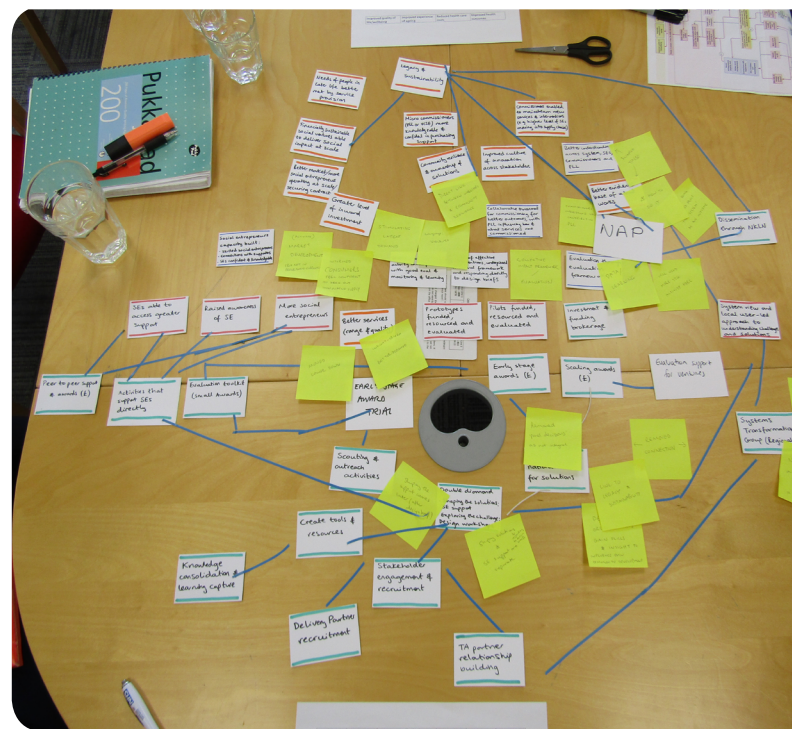
Tested it with internal experts: We asked key members from each organisation to review our second draft and provide feedback on the relevant components.

Identified evidence we'd need to test it: The CIF team integrated the changes into a revised theory of change. We used this version to decide what evidence we would need to collect to test our theory.

Created a supporting evaluation framework: To evidence how the programme is performing against the different areas of the theory of change, we developed an evaluation framework. The framework sets out the outcomes we want to evidence alongside indicators (quantitative and qualitative), methods/tools, timelines and responsibility. We review it whenever we update the theory of change to ensure that all the indicators are matched with outcomes as the programme evolves.

Kept it 'alive': At its best, a theory of change is a living document. We have since reviewed our theory of change to reflect what we have learned during the programme so far. The practical changes we have made will be explored in section 4 (How our learning framework has helped us to adapt and make changes), but first we will look at how we collect, organise and apply our learning.

How we developed our learning framework

The cornerstone of developmental evaluation relies on the creation and use of a learning framework, rather than an evaluation framework. An evaluation framework guides the planning and management of evaluation by matching outcomes, indicators, collection methods and responsibilities.[8] A learning framework sets out what the whole team, including the CIF team, need to pay attention to during the delivery of a programme like Transform Ageing.

To make the learning framework a useful document, we included the voices of those involved in delivering the programme. Here are the steps we followed:

1. We asked different members of the programme team, "what are you most excited about and what are you most worried about?"
2. We took all the responses, clustered them into themes, and presented them back for validation
3. We aligned it with our theory of change to ensure that they were complementary documents
4. The Programme Governance Board provided input, and based on their feedback, we added some overarching learning questions:

    i. What are we learning about the needs and aspirations of people in later life?
    ii. How are the relationships between partners working?
    iii. What is the added value of delivery organisations?
    iv. What are the main challenges and opportunities of supporting social entrepreneurs in the ageing sector?

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[8] Better Evaluation, 'Developmental Evaluation' [online] (accessed 26 June 2018)

Learning Framework for Transform Ageing

What do we need to pay attention to?

Context

- What contextual factors affect the success of the programme?
- What are the critical success factors for this work elsewhere?
- What's unique about the programme?

The partnership

- Working relationships between the partners
- Working relationships between teams
- What have been the key achievements of the partnership to date?
- What's working?
- What do we need to improve?
- What are the critical success factors for a successful partnership?
- What are the wider benefits of the partnership for all partners? (improve work, new collaborations)

Programme Design

- What have been the challenges for the programme to date?
- What have been the successes for the programme to date?
- How have the programme components evolved over its course?
- Insights for model design & recommendations for change

Delivery organisations

- What is the role of delivery organisations?
- What is the added value of delivery organisations?
- Relationships with delivery organisations
- How do the selected delivery organisations affect the programme? (both in terms of delivery and outcomes)

Stakeholders

- What are we learning about the needs and aspirations of people in later life?
- How are dialogues with different stakeholders developing in reaction to the programme

The co-design process

- What are the facilitators and barriers to the co-design process in the south-west?
- Trust
- Power balances and ownership
- Who is engaged in the programme? Who is missing?

Systems Change

- What are we learning about the systems that the programme is engaging with and how they operate?

Supporting social entrepreneurs

- Outreach – Level of interest, engagement, and quality of applications
- Support accessed by social entrepreneurs
- What are the main challenges and opportunities of supporting social entrepreneurs in the ageing sector?
- What business models are SEs using?

Commissioning

- What are the facilitators and barriers to commissioning social entrepreneurs?
- Legitimacy of social entrepreneurship
- Perceptions of risk
- Time and resource
- Standards of evidence

What else are we noticing?*

*Data collected through quarterly reflective sessions & emerging insights from practitioners (team meetings)

How we are using the learning framework

To be useful, a learning framework has to be a living document that changes as the programme develops. We use it to embed reflection and learning in the running of the programme, collecting and applying insights as they emerge.

We use it to develop and structure learning activities, e.g. reflective sessions. Throughout the year we hold reflective sessions with our delivery team in the south-west, the Programme Governance Board, delivery organisations and the wider programme teams. Members of the CIF team facilitate these sessions, referring to the learning framework to shape the conversation and record the reflections that emerge. We will look at what this has meant for the programme at the end of the paper.

We use it to structure and frame learning papers. From the reflective sessions we produce bi-annual learning papers for the programme team to reflect on. These papers, and the discussions they prompt, create space for us to identify what is working, what has been unexpected, and make changes as a result.

We use it to bring together emerging insights from different sources, e.g. team meetings and reflective sessions. Insights are recorded systematically in a central place and then shared through Learning Papers with all members of the team to empower them to make informed decisions and quick changes.

We use it to review and test our theory of change. As we continue to progress through Transform Ageing, we are using insights generated from our learning activity to review our theory of change. This review process will help us to understand in 'real-time' how the programme is achieving its outcomes, or not, and if the assumptions we have identified remain true. In the spirit of reflection and learning, we are also sharing relevant insights and learning throughout the duration of the programme with a wider audience.

How our emphasis on learning helps us to adapt

Using insights from our learning activity to review our theory of change gives us the chance to bring learning and accountability together.[9]

Having feedback mechanisms between the insights generated with other teams means that we can act swiftly and decisively when issues arise. This way of working has led to adaptations to the programme, for example:

Changes to the evaluation during the programme. Working with social entrepreneurs and programme staff on the innovation briefs revealed that Transform Ageing's focus on the commissioning of services ignored other routes to the market for social entrepreneurs. As the programme adapted to accommodate this, some of our original indicators were updated or removed all together.[10]

Updating the objectives of the programme. Through reflective sessions, it became clear that the delivery organisations have far more to offer than our theory of change recognised. This resulted in an updated theory of change that recognises the importance of their role to securing the programme's legacy.

Using evaluation to facilitate collaboration. As a result of reflective sessions, the whole team was brought together to address differences between ways of working and organisational cultures. New opportunities for collaborating across teams as well as organisations emerged. For example, the Marcomms team worked with programme leads to better articulate the value of Transform Ageing to new audiences.

Changing how we approach and produce reports. Several months into the programme we discussed making changes to the reporting schedule with the Big Lottery Fund. They have actively encouraged our learning approach and how we can share our experience more widely. We are now writing ten shorter reports throughout the programme, focussed on particular areas. That provides space for papers like this, with an emphasis on reflection and sharing what we have learnt throughout, rather than waiting until the midpoint or end of a programme.

Over the coming months, we will be writing papers which reflect on using design thinking to tackle social challenges, what barriers social entrepreneurs face evidencing their impact, and how they have responded to the design briefs. These papers will report on indicators in our evaluation framework, also drawing on data we collect and the insights gathered from reflective sessions. This process encourages an ongoing dialogue between theory-based and developmental evaluation in the programme.

[9] We share some more programme specific examples in the appendix.
[10] We were due to report on whether people in later life who had been involved in the design of our innovation briefs felt more able to influence how services were commissioned. The change in focus meant this was no longer an indicator of success for Transform Ageing.

Learning about learning

When it is working well, evaluation makes sense of the work that is being undertaken.

To some, it is simply part of the cycle of funding and delivery; an obligation rather than a tool for understanding what works and what doesn't. When the CIF team designed the evaluation for Transform Ageing we hoped that it would enable us to:

- Evidence the impact the programme had in the south-west
- Enable the programme to use learning to drive timely and evidence-based decision making.

We believed that by using theory-based and developmental evaluation as complementary approaches we would be able to meet these objectives and respond to complexity with innovation. We believe that the value of doing this would be limited if either the people involved or the funder didn't feel it was useful for the programme.[11] From open conversations about this, we have identified a number of benefits from our focus on learning:

1. **Space to reflect and learn together.** Integrating learning activities, such as reflective sessions, into other programme activities, for example team meetings, has created space for people involved in different parts of the programme to reflect, learn and be open to change. Over time these activities have also encouraged a culture of feedback and reflection that individuals have integrated more broadly into their practice.
2. **Changing perceptions about evaluation.** Overall, we've received feedback that the evaluation has felt like a tool for growing and improving the programme, rather than just reporting to a funder. The Big Lottery Fund have been supportive of our approach and we think that this is critical to making this way of working a success.

[11] Some reflections from the team delivering the programme on making use of innovation and the evaluation design are shared in the appendix

3. **Building shared purpose across teams.** We received feedback from people involved that having open conversations in both reflective sessions and when discussing learning, forges links in the programme between evaluation, delivery, and innovation. Communication between these three elements of the programme empowers those involved to make sense of the work and engage with change confidently.

Our approach is not the only way of doing things, indeed if we were to run the programme again there would be things we would do differently. Reflecting on this, we think that there are some useful questions for funders and programme partners to consider when designing evaluations for innovative programme, like Transform Ageing:

1. What scope is there to make changes to the evaluation during the programme and who would need to be involved?
2. What does using an innovative approach mean for the programme's objectives, reporting, and timelines?
3. How will learning be documented and who should it be shared with?
4. How can learning activities be integrated with other programme activities, e.g. team meetings?
5. How could evaluation get in the way of innovation and what can be put in place to avoid this?

What we have found so far is that bringing together theory-based and developmental evaluation enables Transform Ageing to use real time learning to understand the complexity it operates in. Perhaps most encouragingly, programme staff have found the process helpful in dealing with change and identifying strategic priorities. The interplay between the different elements has provided the balance between accountability and learning we were striving for and hopefully the experience and reflections we have shared will be of use to others considering how to evaluate complex programmes.

Appendices

i. What it has meant for people involved

It was important for us to understand the difference the evaluation made to the delivery team's way of working. We spoke to them in the process of writing this paper and their insights have shaped our thinking. We also wanted to share some of the practical advice that emerged in the process of speaking to them:

- Reflective sessions can feel like a luxury, especially in the early days of the programme when the focus is on design and starting delivery. However, finding time to better understand the other organisation and people in the partnership makes it easier to take decisive actions and people would have preferred more of this at the outset.

- Time pressures meant we didn't get to speak to as many people as we would have liked to when putting together our learning framework. If we ran the programme again we would have spoken to people in later life and delivery organisations.

- Dealing with complexity means it isn't always easy to understand or articulate the challenge we are attempting to solve or our collective goal. Different teams in the programme have different priorities – the marketing and communications team reflected that a clear impact makes it easier to tell compelling stories and to sell the programme which might have happened sooner in a purely theory-based model. Those involved in programme management on the other hand, noted that the reflective element was hugely influential in understanding the challenge we were engaging with.

- Feeding insights back into the programme through learning papers and theory of change reviews made sure evaluation activity had a clear sense of purpose and kept knowledge close to hand. The balance between the different elements felt as important as the activities themselves for the programme team.

- Evaluation felt like a tool for growing the programme rather than just reporting to Big Lottery Fund. There were however, still occasions when wanting to change came up against the immovable elements of project delivery.

ii. Learning for Future Programmes

Alongside the insights that can drive change in Transform Ageing, we have also gathered some learning that could inform the design of future innovative programmes like Transform Ageing:

- As well as focussing on governance structures and delivery plans, try to spend time early on establishing partnership values and getting to know how each organisation likes to work.

- Consider the implications of geography on decision-making and collaboration and what this means for activities, timelines and budgets. In Transform Ageing, increasingly devolving decision-making to the delivery team has allowed for more nimble responses and innovations.

- The delivery team noticed that our larger ventures were focussed in Exeter and were struggling to find traction in rural areas. As a result, the expertise of delivery organisations is being used to run targeted events aimed at diversifying our pipeline of social entrepreneurs.

- Bringing extra resources to an area that already has a vibrant sector of small, voluntary organisations may be perceived as duplicating existing efforts rather than helping to develop new solutions.

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