

**Research and evaluation in the criminal justice  
Voluntary and Community Sector:  
a conversation**

**Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> November 2012**

**Report**

**Professor Anthea Hucklesby (University of Leeds)**

**Lesley Frazer (Policy Manager, Clinks)**

# Research and evaluation in the criminal justice Voluntary and Community Sector: a conversation

## Programme

- 10.00 Registration and refreshments
- 10.30 **Welcome and introduction**  
Anthea Hucklesby (University of Leeds)  
Clive Martin (Clinks)
- 10.45 **The challenges of research and evaluation for Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations**  
Anthea Hucklesby (University of Leeds) <sup>1</sup>  
Lesley Frazer (Clinks)  
Clare Jones (WomenCentre)
- 11.30 **Preparing for research and evaluation**  
Group discussion
- 12.30 Lunch
- 1.15 **Funders' expectations of evaluation in the VCS**  
Carol Hedderman (University of Leicester) <sup>2</sup>  
Mike Maguire (University of Glamorgan)
- 2.15 **Managing the research and evaluation process for mutual benefit**  
Group discussion
- 3.15 Refreshments
- 3.30 **Reflections on research and evaluation in the VCS**  
Fergus McNeill (University of Glasgow) <sup>3</sup>
- 4.15 **Next steps**  
Anthea Hucklesby (University of Leeds)
- 4.30 End

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<sup>1</sup> Online:

<http://www.clinks.org/assets/files/PDFs/Event%20reports/Prof%20A%20Hucklesby%2029%20Nov%202012.pptx>

<sup>2</sup> Online:

<http://www.clinks.org/assets/files/PDFs/Event%20reports/Prof%20Carol%20Hedderman%2029%20Nov%202012.pptx>

<sup>3</sup> Online:

<http://www.clinks.org/assets/files/PDFs/Event%20reports/Prof%20Fergus%20McNeill%2029%20Nov%202012.ppt>

## 1. Introduction

This roundtable event was convened and funded by the University of Leeds and Clinks to explore some of the key themes and issues arising from research and evaluation in the criminal justice Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS). The roundtable arose out of the ESRC funded seminar series *The Third Sector in Criminal Justice* jointly organised by Professor Anthea Hucklesby, Dr Mary Corcoran (Keele University) and Dr Alice Mills (University of Auckland). The seminar series, which took place during 2011-12, brought together academics, VCS organisations, criminal justice agencies, policy makers and researchers. It critically explored VCS involvement in the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and considered how it might develop in the future. The seminars also aimed to encourage interdisciplinary research and contribute to evidence-based policy making in the area.<sup>4</sup>

One of the key findings of the seminar series was that there was often a significant gap between the expectations of funders in terms of research and evaluation and what VCS organisations were able to deliver. Furthermore, tensions sometimes arose between VCS organisations and researchers because of differing expectations of the research process and outcomes. Such concerns had been brought into sharp focus recently by the Government's agenda to open up the provision of criminal justice services to competition and the introduction of Payment by Results.

Building upon the ESRC funded seminars, the roundtable event sought to explore the particular challenges of research and evaluation for VCS organisations working with offenders and their families and what might constitute a proportionate approach to evaluation that all parties – commissioners, funders, evaluators and the VCS– could agree and which was manageable and realistic. It brought together 39 individuals from criminal justice VCS organisations, academics; research and evaluation organisations, charitable trust funders and key government departments (Ministry of Justice (MoJ)), National Offender Management Service (NOMS), Home Office) (see delegate list at Appendix 1).

There was general agreement amongst delegates that research was a valuable tool for VCS organisations and their funders and supporters. There was a clear recognition that VCS organisations cannot simply claim to be a 'good thing' without providing evidence to support their assertions. It was acknowledged that whilst some excellent work takes place in the VCS, some organisations do not deliver services of sufficiently quality and should not receive funding, particularly at the expense of other more effective services. Research, therefore, provides an evidence base for funders to invest in the best services whilst disinvesting in others.

## 2. Partnership working between VCS organisations, funders and researchers

Initial discussion focussed on the elements that need to be considered and/or put in place before research begins. Ideally, there should be extensive discussion between funders, researchers and VCS organisations prior to the research commencing. This should allow expectations to be aligned, and agreement to be reached, about the aims and purpose of the research, appropriate methodologies and outcomes. It would also facilitate a shared understanding of the limitations of the research. Researchers also stressed the importance of this phase of the research in increasing their understanding of the organisation's and/or project's aims and objectives; model of change and anticipated outputs and outcomes. It also enables researchers to have a clearer understanding of existing data collection processes. Researchers also stressed the importance of continued involvement of funders

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<sup>4</sup> Grant reference: RES-451-26-0823. Details including reports and presentations are available at: <http://www.law.leeds.ac.uk/research/projects/the-third-sector-in-criminal-justice.php> [last accessed 7.2.2013]

and commissioners in the research process and of a regular dialogue between the parties involved.

VCS organisations and funders/commissioners were urged to think carefully about the purpose of research they commission. Although research may legitimately be about validating approaches rather than independent scrutiny, researchers were concerned that some VCS organisations view research findings mainly as a marketing tool, rather than as enabling reflection and evaluation of their work. Funders' expectations may also run counter to the need to learn from mistakes. Approaching research as a validation tool for existing practice inevitably impacts upon the way researcher/provider relationships are constructed and develop, how findings are received and whether findings are disseminated. Issues of independence and rigor also arise when research is undertaken by individuals within, or closely associated with, organisations or by those who are insufficiently qualified or experienced.

It was acknowledged that a single VCS organisation may, at any one time, be satisfying a plethora of different funders' expectations and research requirements and that this has significant resource implications. It was recognised that efforts have been made by some charitable trust funders to align their monitoring and evaluation approaches, but in practice this is very difficult. However, there was general agreement that smaller VCS organisations might struggle with funders' evaluation requirements and that a more proportionate approach should be sought. Several suggestions were made to decrease the burden on VCS organisations including the development and application of toolkits and the sharing of resources. Such an approach might involve collating and analysing positive experiences of research and evaluation in order to identify best practice. An appreciative inquiry approach was suggested as having the most potential to elicit productive and effective research and evaluation frameworks which could then be shared. It was identified that funders need to be a partner in this process to increase their knowledge of research and evaluation, so that they can provide support when evaluations are being designed and commissioned.

### **3. Outcomes measures**

Evidencing what works in the CJS is problematic for all sectors. Outcome attribution is especially difficult in complex systems where a number of different partners may be working with individual offenders. Recently, considerable disquiet has surfaced around the outcome measures for Payment by Results (PbR). PbR uses a binary outcome measure of whether or not offenders have been reconvicted in a specified period of time. It was agreed that this approach is unrealistic and unworkable for the majority of VCS organisations working with offenders and their families. Consequently, most delegates supported strongly the need to challenge this approach on a number of grounds. One, offenders receive assistance from a wide range of services and are affected by multiple other external influences. Two, there is an intrinsic incompatibility between the binary outcome and what we know about offenders' uneven journeys towards desistance. Three, human rights/needs are not compatible with binary outcome measures. Four, the binary measure is incompatible with some of the VCS's work, for example with prisoners' families.

Delegates commented that the quantity and quality of evidence required to validate their work is increasing. For example, the NOMS' *Commissioning Intentions Negotiation Document* for 2013-14 privileges peer-reviewed studies based on demanding quantitative methodologies, although there is also a very welcome acknowledgement of the need to measure intermediate outcomes and the value of rigorous qualitative research. Larger VCS organisations may be able to satisfy NOMS requirements but their preferred methodologies are not appropriate for all VCS organisations. Nevertheless, it had been observed that government requirements were being utilised increasingly by other funders, even in relation to very small VCS organisations, causing considerable anxiety for a Sector with limited capacity and funding. For example, some delegates wished to discourage the use of

cost/benefit/social return on investment analyses by smaller, relatively unsophisticated VCS organisations and felt commissioners and other funders were in danger of pushing people to use these methods inappropriately. At this scale, a simpler and more flexible approach was deemed to be more appropriate

Although the value of reconviction rates was acknowledged, the nature of the work of VCS organisations should also lead to a broader range of outcomes being considered. Consequently, it was agreed that organisations, alone and together, should advocate actively for more appropriate research methodologies to be adopted. Commissioners were also urged to think beyond reducing reoffending outcomes, valuing other intermediate measures/outputs/outcomes. When scoping out evaluations, commissioners were urged to specify outcomes measures which build a richer, more nuanced evidence base to inform future service design.

It was agreed that innovation is of value in itself and might inform different evaluation approaches. Some EU funding streams, for example, invest in 'good ideas' to test potential without pre-defined outcomes (social experimentation). However, it was also acknowledged that there are well-known problems with replicating and scaling-up innovative and pilot projects. However, a nuanced understanding of what works and what does not in particular contexts is as important. Chaos theory suggests that every initiative generates its own unique history – which is perhaps why pilots rarely 'roll out' uniformly – and that when dealing with intractable 'wicked issues' like offending, there is no neat linear causal relationship between service inputs and individual outcomes. Consequently, diversity should be respected and allowed to flourish and local evaluation with it. There may be more opportunities to support desistance through localised approaches because they are more likely to take account of discrete and complex issues and work with marginalised and hard to reach groups. Greater value therefore needs to be placed on subsidiary and bottom up approaches to research design.

It was generally agreed that research should involve the whole organisation, including service users, where resources allow. Taking account of individual transformations was viewed as an important measureable outcome for VCS organisations. Accounts of service users were thought by many to be missing from the current dominant discourse around outcome measurement and what constitutes acceptable evidence of change. What makes sense to funders in terms of evaluation may not make much sense to participants. Commissioners and researchers were therefore urged to value qualitative approaches, stories and case studies because accounts of service users have the capacity to inform the quality and effectiveness of services. Even where 'softer' methodologies such as the *Outcomes Star* are used to measure a basket of intermediate outcomes, users themselves are still best placed to say what has worked, how it worked and why. If the ultimate goal is authentic desistance, then quality-based commissioning and evaluation are likely to be a more meaningful approach than one based on reconviction or intermediate outcome measures.

#### **4. Next steps: priorities identified by the delegates**

Delegates agreed that the event was timely and that its conclusions should be shared widely. Their priorities could be clustered under a number of headings:

##### ***Support for the Sector to identify and share worthwhile approaches***

- The VCS needs support to better define its own measures of success and to articulate a shared understanding of what criminal justice outcomes should be measured.

- An appreciative inquiry workshop should be held to identify VCS success stories and positive experiences of research/evaluation in supporting service improvement.
- A partnership approach to research and evaluation is the most appropriate, engaging researchers, providers and service users in the co-production of knowledge.

### ***Practical support for the Sector***

- VCS organisations, commissioners and funders require practical guidance about research and evaluation but further discussions are needed before guidance is produced.
- VCS support networks should be created to share knowledge and experiences of research and how to use it effectively in service design and delivery. The network might also pair organisations for peer evaluation advice and offer academic supervision of VCS evaluation.
- Consistent data gathering systems to assist VCS organisations are needed.
- Smaller organisations asked for a briefing paper to assist them to challenge the binary outcome measures.
- An evidence library is needed, similar to the new Arts Alliance evidence library.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Support for VCS collaborations***

- It was suggested collaborative approaches to research should be explored and greater co-ordination between small VCS organisations around need and impact measurement would be helpful.

### ***Challenging and lobbying***

- It was agreed that there should be a greater collective challenge, led by Clinks, to the use of binary reconviction measure in PbR contracts, involving academics, VCS organisations and funders. This should include work to articulate a more proportionate approach to what constitutes acceptable evidence, especially for small VCS organisations.
- It was suggested that a further joint work/a follow up event should be convened to lobby the Justice Secretary (Chris Grayling) and the relevant commissioning and research teams within MoJ and NOMS.

### ***An agreed research and evaluation agenda for the Criminal Justice System***

- It was suggested that an agreed a research and evaluation agenda would be useful which could be endorsed by ESRC, independent funders and learned societies.

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.artsalliance.org.uk/evidence-library>

## Delegate List

Nicola	<b>Abrams</b>	Ministry of Justice
Sarah	<b>Anderson</b>	Revolving Doors Agency
George	<b>Barrow</b>	Ministry of Justice
Mark	<b>Blake</b>	BTEG
Mary	<b>Corcoran</b>	Keele University
Sarah	<b>del Tufo</b>	Sarah del Tufo / Associates
Nathan	<b>Dick</b>	Clinks
Nicola	<b>Drinkwater</b>	Clinks
Sara	<b>Featherstone</b>	Home Office
Lydia	<b>Finnegan</b>	Inclusion
Eryl	<b>Foulkes</b>	Tudor Trust
Lesley	<b>Frazer</b>	Clinks
Lorraine	<b>Gelsthorpe</b>	University of Cambridge
Roger	<b>Grimshaw</b>	Centre for Crime & Justice Studies
Jess	<b>Haskins</b>	NOMS
Carol	<b>Hedderman</b>	University of Leicester
Sue	<b>Holloway</b>	Pro Bono Economics
Paul	<b>Housden</b>	People Can
Anthea	<b>Hucklesby</b>	University of Leeds
Clare	<b>Jones</b>	WomenCentre Ltd
Anne	<b>Kazimirski</b>	New Philanthropy Capital
Lisa	<b>Kinghorn</b>	Vision Housing
Martin	<b>Kinsella</b>	P3
Mike	<b>Maguire</b>	University of Glamorgan
Clive	<b>Martin</b>	Clinks
Fergus	<b>McNeill</b>	University of Glasgow
Adam	<b>Moll</b>	Safeground
Richard	<b>Nicholls</b>	Clinks
Katie	<b>O'Donoghue</b>	Clinks
Simon	<b>Pellew</b>	Time for Families
Polly	<b>Radcliffe</b>	ICPR
Sarah	<b>Salmon</b>	Action for Prisoners Families
Paul	<b>Senior</b>	Sheffield Hallam University
Lauren	<b>Small</b>	Inclusion
David	<b>Toothill</b>	Southbank Mosaics
Dan	<b>Vale</b>	LankellyChase Foundation
Penny	<b>Vowles</b>	Northern Rock Foundation
Kate	<b>Williams</b>	Aberystwyth University