Building an approach to self evaluation: 
a guide for small organisations delivering children’s speech, language and communication services
# Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The purpose of this guide</th>
<th>Page 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1:</strong> Understand who it is you are helping</td>
<td>Page 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 2:</strong> Understand the difference you are trying to make</td>
<td>Page 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 3:</strong> Focus on changes that you make in the short and intermediate term</td>
<td>Page 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 4:</strong> Decide how to measure progress against those changes</td>
<td>Page 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 5:</strong> Measure the difference you make</td>
<td>Page 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 6:</strong> Use your findings</td>
<td>Page 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Glossary of key terms</strong>&lt;br&gt;(all words in bold throughout the guide are defined in the glossary)</td>
<td>Page 22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Purpose of this evaluation guide

This guide is specifically designed for small voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations delivering children’s speech, language and communication (SLC) services. It is intended to be used when reviewing or building an approach to self evaluation. It’s aimed at organisations whose services and approaches include one or more of the following1:

- **Specialist level services**: those services addressing specific, long term or complex needs through support with SLC.
- **Targeted level services**: those focussed on children who have mild/moderate SLC needs, are at risk of developing them or who have not been adequately supported through universal services.
- **Universal level services**: those focused on all children’s speech, language and communication.

This guide takes you through six steps which will help you consider:

- How to collect good quality data to inform decisions about improving the **efficiency** and **effectiveness** of your services in a cost effective and timely manner.
- How to communicate the difference you make (your **evidence base**) more clearly to your funders.

1 Some organisations may use the terms ‘universal, targeted, specialist’ to mean slightly different things
Six steps:

1. Understand who it is you are helping
   Understand your beneficiaries, your **target group**, and any **gaps in reach**.

2. Understand the difference you are trying to make
   Clearly articulate your overall **mission** and **specific aims**.

3. Focus on changes in the short and intermediate term
   Clearly define short and intermediate term **outcomes**.

4. Decide how to measure progress against those changes
   Identify **outcome indicators** - measures of success.

5. Measure the difference you make
   Put into practice **appropriate data collection methods**.

6. Use your findings
   Use your findings to help improve the **efficiency** and **effectiveness** of your services.
Step 1

Understand who it is you are helping

Understand your beneficiaries, your target group and any gaps in reach
Why?
- To show that you are reaching the right people i.e. people in need of your services.
- To help identify gaps in reach - the difference between your beneficiaries (the individuals you actually reach) and your target group (the individuals you aim to reach). This is crucial for service development.
- To help quantify level of need, providing a useful baseline measure against which to measure success.

What?
- Identify your direct and indirect beneficiaries. Are you directly supporting children or indirectly supporting them through working with education staff or parents/carers?
- In order to understand who you are reaching and the effectiveness of your input for different groups of people, it’s important to collect socio-demographic information.

How?
- By reviewing beneficiary data that you’re collecting already.
- Where possible, by building collection of beneficiary data into service delivery.
- If feasible, by storing data in a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) database rather than an Excel spreadsheet so that everyone across the organisation (senior management, frontline staff and those responsible for evaluation) is able to access accurate, up to date data.

Collect socio-demographic information

For children and parents/carers - age, gender, ethnic background, special educational need (if relevant), parental education and working status.

For education staff - the nature of their role (whether they are working with all children, vulnerable children or children with additional needs) and the nature of the setting in which they are working. For example, school deprivation indicator or % of pupils with a special educational need.

Collect detail about the level of need for your service

For children - nature of SLC strengths/needs, confidence and self esteem.

For education staff and parents/carers - knowledge of SLC development or awareness of appropriate strategies to support SLC needs. (This will be refined at step 3).

Understand your beneficiaries, your target group and any gaps in reach
Step 2

Understand the difference you are trying to make

Clearly articulate your overall mission and specific aims
Why?

- To help articulate the rationale for your approach.
- To help identify what you need to measure.

What?

- The key to measuring the difference you make is to be clear about your mission and your specific aims as well as your activities (see CES Planning Triangle©).
- If your direct beneficiaries are children, it’s important to remember that both your mission and your specific aims may extend beyond developing their SLC skills (i.e. it may include broader life skills such as improved confidence and self esteem, improved behaviour and improved participation).
- If your direct beneficiaries are education staff or parents/carers, the change you are trying to achieve for them needs to be reflected in your specific aims.

How?

- A workshop with internal and external key stakeholders can be used to: identify the difference you make in the short term; identify the difference this makes in the intermediate term; explain how this leads to your long term aim.
- This can be facilitated by an external organisation using visual tools like theory of change, logic models or the CES Planning Triangle©.
- These tools are usually more straightforward than they sound. It’s important to remember that they are simply strategic planning tools rather than outcomes themselves. They’re designed to help you (among other things) understand and articulate what you’re trying to achieve – and can provide you with a living diagram that should be updated as the work of the organisation develops.
- A number of organisations e.g. NPC, Nesta, NCVO offer courses to help plan your monitoring and evaluation using one of these tools.

Clearly articulate your overall mission and specific aims
CES Planning Triangle:
An example of a strategic planning tool used to plan your monitoring and evaluation.

- OVERALL AIM: The core purpose of your organisation
- SPECIFIC AIMS: The difference you hope to make for your beneficiaries
- ACTIVITIES: The main services and activities you plan to carry out to help you achieve your specific aims
Step 3

Focus on changes that you make in the short and intermediate term

Clearly define short and intermediate term outcomes
Why?
- In the real world, long term benefits can occur a long time, even years, after your work with an individual.
- It’s not cost effective to design an evaluation of long term outcomes without measuring progress towards your long term goal.
- Links between intermediate and long term goals are often well established. For example, improved teaching practice leads to better learning outcomes for children.
- Your evaluation approach needs to be proportionate and appropriate to the scale and scope of the work.
- Ultimate success in realising long term aims is dependent on a lot of external factors beyond the organisation’s control.

What?
- Look for change in the right place. This means focusing on the changes you make in the short and intermediate term. For example, differences in measurable aspects of behaviour, teaching skills etc.
- As well as demonstrating progress towards a long term goal, this is invaluable for giving timely feedback about how well your approach/service is working and identifying areas for improvement.

How?
- By prioritising short and intermediate changes that:
  - are expressed in your specific aims.
  - illustrate progress towards your long term goals.
  - you directly influence (rather than indirectly support).
  - are not too costly to measure.
- By concentrating on the change to your direct beneficiaries. While many SLC organisations aim to help improve SLC, this is not always directly achieved through their work.
- It might be more important to measure the knowledge and skills changes for education staff, parents or carers rather than the SLC changes in children.
- An ‘outcomes chain’ can be used to identify appropriate short and intermediate term outcomes while illustrating how these lead to your long term goals. See examples on the next page.

Your outcomes are the changes or benefits resulting from your service or intervention.
**Outcomes chains**
for different service levels

**Universal Level Service**
- Mission: To improve educational achievement for all children
- Activities/Outputs: SLC training for the school wider workforce. Provision of resources e.g. clearer signing
- Short Term Outcomes: Improved knowledge and awareness of SLC development and methods to support SLC development
  - School Workforce
- Intermediate Outcomes: Improved teaching practice, Improved learning environment
  - School Workforce
- Long Term Outcomes: Improved achievement and attainment
  - All Children

**Targeted Level Service**
- Mission: To narrow the gap in SLC skills for children from ‘at risk’ or disadvantaged groups
- Activities/Outputs: SLC training for teaching staff working with vulnerable children
- Short Term Outcomes: Improved knowledge and awareness of SLC needs and strategies to support SLC development
  - Teaching Staff
- Intermediate Outcomes: Improved ability to identify SLC needs, Improved skills in supporting SLC development
  - Teaching Staff
- Long Term Outcomes: Improved SLC skills and support of SLC needs
  - Vulnerable Children

**Specialist Level Service**
- Mission: To realise the communication potential and improve the quality of life of children with a specialist need
- Activities/Outputs: Specialist staff deliver specific programme adapted to the child’s specialist need
- Short Term Outcomes: Improved SLC skills in this context
  - Children with Additional Needs
- Intermediate Outcomes: Increased confidence and self esteem, Improved behaviour, Increased participation
  - Children with Additional Needs
- Long Term Outcomes: Improved health and wellbeing
  - Children with Additional Needs

**Step 3:** Focus on changes that you make in the short and intermediate term

Draw on external evidence that links the intermediate and long term outcomes.
Step 4

Decide how to measure progress against those changes

Identify outcome indicators - measures of success
Identify outcome indicators - measures of success

Why?
- Once you have identified your beneficiaries and your outcomes, you need to decide how to track progress on achieving those outcomes (outcome indicators).

What?
- **Outcome indicators** are the measures of success against the hoped for changes (outcomes).
- The **outcome indicators** you choose will be highly individual to your target group and the changes you want to measure.
- Consider data that your practitioners or partners are collecting already.
- Be clear about your commissioner’s/funder’s expectations and think about the skills and resources you have available to collect the relevant data.

How?
- By using existing **outcomes frameworks** (see table 1) to identify appropriate outcome indicators and existing tools for measuring change against the outcomes you have identified.
- By contacting organisations that work with a similar target group/have similar aims and ask them if they are happy to share what they have used successfully.
- By seeking specialist support if necessary. This is particularly important if you want to measure success against unique outcomes not identified in the existing frameworks. It is usually more cost effective to seek support at the design stage rather than at the analysis phase.
### Examples of outcomes and outcome indicators

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct beneficiary (Target group)</th>
<th>Outcome (Hoped for change)</th>
<th>Outcome indicator (Measure of change)</th>
<th>Outcome frameworks (Resources for identifying outcomes, indicators &amp; tools)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People who work with children and young people</td>
<td>Improved knowledge and awareness of SLC development and methods to support SLC development</td>
<td>Increase in % of staff meeting ‘universal’ indicators of competence as set out in SLCF</td>
<td>The Communication Trust The speech, language and communication framework (SLCF)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improved ability to identify SLC needs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased awareness of appropriate strategies to support children with SLC needs</td>
<td>Increase in % of staff meeting ‘enhanced’ levels of competence as set out in SLCF</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents and carers</td>
<td>Improved understanding of the importance of the parental role in supporting SLC development</td>
<td>Increase in % of parents/carers meeting relevant indicators of competence as set out in SLCF; % of parents/carers with improved confidence to support their child (self reported)</td>
<td>Commissioning Support programme (2011). Speech, language and communication needs: evaluating outcomes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| | Increased awareness of appropriate strategies to support their child’s SLC needs | | Enderby and John (2015) Therapy and Outcome Measures for Rehabilitation Professionals
 |
| Children | Improved SLC skills (e.g. increased expressive language, improved comprehension or improved functional communication) | % of children who have moved from below average into average range on standardised assessments; % of children who have improved in measures of functional communication | McNeil, Reeder and Rich (2012) A framework of outcomes for young people. The Young Foundation
 |
| | Improved confidence and self esteem | % of children who have increased confidence and self esteem (self reported or as rated by teacher, parent or carer) | |
| | Improved behaviour | % of children who show improved behaviour (as rated by teacher, parent or carer) | |
| | Increased participation | % of children who have increased punctuality and attendance; % of children who have increased interaction with their peers (as rated by teacher, parent or carer) | |

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2 Identified by the 2015-16 RCSLT outcome measures project as the ‘best fit’ measure for reliable comparable outcomes data across the profession.
Step 5

Measure the difference you make

Put into practice appropriate data collection methods
STEP 5: MEASURE THE DIFFERENCE YOU MAKE

Why?
- To help you understand how well you are achieving your aims.
- To gather evidence against your outcomes.
- To help you understand how you might improve your services in the future.

What?
- Aim for data collection methods that can be built into everyday practice.
- Not everything needs to be assessed all of the time. You may want to conduct or commission one-off pieces of research to understand your beneficiaries and the difference you are making.

How?
- By talking to the people who will be collecting the data and learning from similar organisations (see step 4) to make sure you choose a method that really works in practice.
- Table 2 includes examples of data collection methods that can be used to collect beneficiary data and pre and post measures against your outcomes.
- Table 3 includes examples of data collection methods for one-off pieces of research. This can be particularly useful for keeping in touch with your wider stakeholders e.g. funders, staff, volunteers, as well as your beneficiaries. It can also help to inform your choice of outcome indicators and the data you choose to collect more routinely.
- The methods described here are appropriate for self evaluation. They will not deliver experimental evidence of causal links between your service/activities and outcomes.

- **Self evaluation** is crucial for learning and improving and vital for good strategic planning/good governance. A description of independent evaluation designs suitable for delivering experimental evidence is given in The Communication Trust’s What Works criteria guide.
## Examples of data collection methods that can be built into service delivery

### TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Research</th>
<th>Examples of each type</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
<th>Relative cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative methods for routine collection of beneficiary and outcome data</td>
<td><strong>Short interviews by staff/practitioners</strong> with beneficiaries and/or carers, educators</td>
<td>Easily assimilated into service delivery – get high response rate</td>
<td>Respondent may find it hard to give an honest response when questions delivered by practitioner</td>
<td>£</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Short self-completion surveys</strong> – beneficiaries and/or carers, educators</td>
<td>Self completion surveys – handed out by practitioners at the end of an intervention, online or by post, give respondents freedom to give honest, thoughtful responses</td>
<td>Lower response rates and makes it more difficult to ask complex questions</td>
<td>£</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Examples of data collection methods

for one-off pieces of research

**TABLE 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Research</th>
<th>Examples of each type</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
<th>Relative cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative research</td>
<td><strong>Focus groups</strong></td>
<td>Respondents can benefit from the group dynamic – allows for wider, deeper exploration of a topic</td>
<td>Group dynamic can hinder some respondents from sharing their views</td>
<td>£</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Action learning workshops</strong></td>
<td>Participative research technique that supports co-creation – good for stakeholders</td>
<td>Can be difficult to manage very different views and produce meaningful findings</td>
<td>£</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Depth interviews</strong></td>
<td>Allows in-depth exploration of issues – good for sensitive topics or vulnerable groups</td>
<td>Takes a significant time investment to conduct and analyse</td>
<td>£</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative research</td>
<td><strong>Face to face</strong></td>
<td>Allows complex surveys to be tackled</td>
<td>The interviewer can affect responses particularly on sensitive issues</td>
<td>£</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Online</strong></td>
<td>Respondents are often more comfortable to answer survey questions on sensitive issues online</td>
<td>Some target groups cannot be reached online. Limitations on length and complexity of surveys. Can achieve low response rates.</td>
<td>£</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Telephone</strong></td>
<td>Allows relatively complex surveys to be tackled relatively quickly (quicker than face to face and postal, slower than online)</td>
<td>Cannot present visual stimulus and interviewer can affect responses particularly on sensitive issues</td>
<td>£</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Postal</strong></td>
<td>Useful for audiences that cannot be reached online – no email address available</td>
<td>Slow to turn around – often have very low response rates.</td>
<td>£</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Step 6

Use your **findings**

Use your findings to help improve the **efficiency** and **effectiveness** of your services.
Why?
- To inform the development of your organisation’s services so that they become more efficient and effective.
- To demonstrate your progress.
- To help to improve the **efficiency** and **effectiveness** of the SLC sector more generally.
- To share ‘best practice’ with other SLC organisations and contribute to a wider view of what does or doesn’t work.

What?
- Be clear about the elements of your services that are working well, for which people and in what circumstances.
- Be honest and open about any elements of your services that are working less well and plans for improvement.
- Acknowledge and describe the limitations of your findings.

How?
- Inform the development of services within your organisation by sharing and discussing your findings internally e.g. through team meetings, workshops, senior management and board meetings.
- Inform the development of services in the SLC sector generally by sharing your findings externally e.g. publishing in an annual review or impact report and on your website.

Use your findings to help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of your services
Glossary
## Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key word(s)</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>The actual events or actions that you deliver to achieve your <strong>specific aims</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate data collection methods</td>
<td>The data collection methods chosen to provide the information required by each <strong>outcome indicator</strong>, taking into account the characteristics of the sample and resources available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline measure</td>
<td>Data that provides the basis for measurement of change through a before and after comparison.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CES planning triangle</td>
<td>A visual tool developed by the Charities Evaluation Service (now part of NCVO) to help organisations articulate what they are trying to do and why.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer relationship management (CRM)</td>
<td>An approach to managing an organisation’s interaction with current and potential customers. For an SLCN organisation, this includes its beneficiaries as well as its funders, partners and other stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct beneficiaries</td>
<td>The individuals that benefit directly from your service/intervention.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness</td>
<td>The extent to which a service or intervention’s <strong>specific aims</strong> are achieved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efficiency</td>
<td>The extent to which a service or intervention delivers <strong>outcomes</strong> without wastage of time, effort, money, space or other resources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence base</td>
<td>The rigorously established objective evidence that explains the rationale for your SLC approach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key word(s)</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental evidence</td>
<td>Evidence gathered through observation under controlled conditions. The aim is to measure the impact of the variable under investigation on the subjects. To ensure experimental conditions, subjects should be randomly allocated to an intervention or control group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaps in reach</td>
<td>The difference between the individuals you actually reach (your beneficiaries) and the individuals you aim to reach (your target group).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent evaluation</td>
<td>When an external research specialist carries out an evaluation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect beneficiaries</td>
<td>The individuals that benefit indirectly from the intervention with the direct beneficiaries (e.g. children of parents and carers who are being supported).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logic model</td>
<td>A visual tool that can help to identify short, medium and long term outcomes that are linked to the key activities of a programme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission/ Mission statement</td>
<td>Tells everyone why the organisation exists and the difference it wants to make in the long term.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>The changes or benefits resulting from your service or intervention; these may be specific to speech, language and communication or more general health and social outcomes. They should cover short term, intermediate and longer term outcomes and include (but not be restricted to) those expressed in the specific aims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes chain</td>
<td>Helps you articulate how your activities will help you realise your long term aim by creating a logical progression of the short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome indicators</td>
<td>Measures which allow progress towards your hoped for outcomes to be tracked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcome frameworks</td>
<td>Resources for identifying appropriate outcome indicators and existing tools for measuring change against the outcomes you have identified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outputs</td>
<td>Products, services or facilities that result from an organisation’s activities. Examples would include the number of hours of speech and language therapy provided for children, the number of training sessions provided for education staff, or the number of education staff attending a training session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key word(s)</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative research</td>
<td>Generates statistical evidence to describe a situation - answering questions such as ‘How many?’ ‘When?’ and ‘Where?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative research</td>
<td>Primarily exploratory research used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School deprivation indicator</td>
<td>A school level Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI) score is calculated for each school based on the IDACI score for each pupil’s postcode. IDACI scores are sourced from the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2015.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self evaluation</td>
<td>When an organisation uses its internal expertise to carry out its own evaluation: evaluation is often integrated into project management; evidence is often collected by practitioners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist level services</td>
<td>Those services addressing long term, complex needs through support with speech, language and communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific aims</td>
<td>Describes the key benefits or changes you are trying to achieve for your beneficiaries. Unlike the <strong>mission</strong>, which should encompass all of what the charity does, the specific aims should be separate and specific using words such as ‘to increase’, ‘to improve’, ‘to enable’, ‘to reduce’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders</td>
<td>The people who have an interest in the activities of the organisation. They can include staff, volunteers, <strong>direct and indirect beneficiaries</strong>, trustees, funders, donors and supporters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Targeted level services</td>
<td>Services focused on particular types of SLCN.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target group</td>
<td>The specific individuals for whose benefit the intervention or service has been designed (the individuals you aim to reach as opposed to your beneficiaries – the individuals you actually reach).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory of change</td>
<td>A visual tool that allows you to unpick the needs you are trying to address, the changes you want to make (your <strong>outcomes</strong>), and what you plan to do to achieve these outcomes (your <strong>activities</strong>). It can help you articulate what you are trying to achieve and help improve your overall strategy, measurement, communication and partnership working.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Universal level services</td>
<td>Services focused on all children’s speech, language and communication.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Further reading


NESTA guidance for developing a theory of change for your programme.