

Consultation and involvement: Using staff experience to inform evaluation systems

This case study is about the importance of consulting staff at all levels to improve an organisations evaluation system.

Read it if you are working for a third sector organisation that wants to embed evaluation across an organisation. You may be managing or leading this process, or frontline staff or a volunteer who is part of the process.

It will tell you how to involve staff in an evaluation champions group to explore outcomes and indicators, methods of gathering evidence suitable for collecting data across diverse services.

Introduction

Victim Support Scotland (VSS) has services across Scotland provided by 700 volunteers and 140 staff. In 2015 VSS moved from reporting almost exclusively on its activities towards a more outcome focused approach. It became apparent that existing evidence collection systems were not recording the full breadth of the difference VSS makes to victims and witness of crime. There was a bias towards recording evidence about how VSS helped people *feel better informed* to the exclusion of VSS's other outcomes. Each service had its own forms. This

meant inconsistent practices between the amount and type of recorded data.

What we did

ESS facilitated a **champions group** of 9 staff drawn from different VSS services (Telephone, Victim and Witness), and a senior manager. We met 4 times between July and November 2016. Group members sought feedback from colleagues and volunteers between meetings. The **purpose** of the group was:

To ensure volunteers and staff can collect and record useful and consistent evidence for all of Victim Support Scotland's outcomes, and understand the value of this, so VSS is better able to tell the full story of the difference its services make.

We explored:

- why self-evaluation is important to VSS
- the challenges in evaluating the difference VSS makes
- to what extent VSS' outcomes were embedded in everyday work
- appropriate outcomes and appropriate indicators for each outcome
- how VSS could make better use of victims' stories (case studies)

"Lots of discussion, brain storming, willingness to work together and an excellent facilitator in Martha. Really made us work and think about how we could achieve this."

The group revised VSS's outcomes (we went from 4, to 5 and ended up with 3). We designed a new, unified, evidence collection form that would work for all types of VSS service and be used after every contact with service users. We

planned how to pilot it before making changes to the existing database and rolling the new system out across the organisation. VSS commissioned further support from ESS in 2017 to support the pilot testing and implementation of the new form.

Challenges and successes

Consulting staff at all levels was challenging but necessary to pave the way to improve evaluation processes. Involving staff helped to allay fears about implementing another change and ensuring that the changes were acceptable, doable and beneficial to all services.



The difference we made

[Feedback was gathered anonymously at the final champions group meeting.]

There is strong evidence that ESS helped VSS to **improve its systems for collecting and using evidence**. VSS now has **three clear organisation-wide outcomes**, based on those they had originally identified, but clarified and refined in consultation with representatives from a range of services.

"It will help us evidence our outcomes systematically and appropriately; not measure what we can't help with."

For example, VSS can't directly influence service users' financial security. What they can do is help people to feel better informed about how to get help with the financial impact of crime.

There had been some anxiety about how "yet another" change of system would be received by services. So **consultation**

and involvement was important to several of the champions group. Having a clear rationale for the change and knowing that the form was developed in consultation with front-line staff have helped pave the way and it has been **well received** during the pilot.

"Helped me see the workings as to "final" product."

"I felt VSS were making wrong decisions and making changes which were not explained or necessary. This work we have produced makes sense and will be worth the change."

"This has given me a greater understanding of what VSS are trying to achieve with regards to their outcomes. It also confirmed to me that what we were doing previously wasn't working and it wasn't that I just wasn't getting it!"

Commenting on the entire programme, the member of VSS' senior management team responsible for this work said:

"Without the expert knowledge of Martha and ESS we would most likely deviate from the good work done so far and stray from the main objective... of evidencing outcomes. Well done ESS, you do what you say on tin." Eilidh Brown

One group member said that having greater clarity and awareness about VSS's outcomes could, in itself, help staff and volunteers to **improve the quality of service** by prompting them to tailor it more consciously to victims' and witnesses' individual needs. This is evidence for ESS's outcome "**3rd sector uses evaluation to make better decisions about policy and practice.**"



What we learnt

This work reinforced our learning about working with larger organisations:

1. Run a **series** of support sessions, spaced over time and engage people from **across different services**. This is effective in supporting an organisation to review and improve outcomes and evidence collection methods
 2. Involve people **at the right level for the work**. So for VSS that meant:
 - front-line staff to ensure resulting outcomes and evaluation methods made sense in the context of everyday work, and to ensure authenticity and ownership
 - volunteers and other staff via consultation between sessions
 - a manager with capacity to lead the work and authority to make it happen
 3. Spend time ensuring that **everyone's perspective** is heard and the needs of bigger services aren't disproportionately dominant to ensure staff buy-in.
 4. Build **flexibility** from the start and be realistic about what can be achieved in the time allotted. There is a fine balance between making excessive demands on busy staff and dedicating sufficient time to complete the task.
 5. Write a **summary** of each session. This helps the group share progress effectively with the wider organisation.
- **Looking to the future** – VSS is currently piloting the new data collection system. A new database may be needed. It is expected that the new system will be rolled out across the whole organisation at the end of the pilot.

If you are thinking of doing something similar we suggest you

- ✓ Take time to plan your approach to involve staff from all levels and different services (if appropriate)
- ✓ Find a way to engage all staff through the process of change - perhaps through updates at team meetings or staff newsletters.

Contact details

If you want ESS's support please contact [Evaluation Support Scotland](#)
