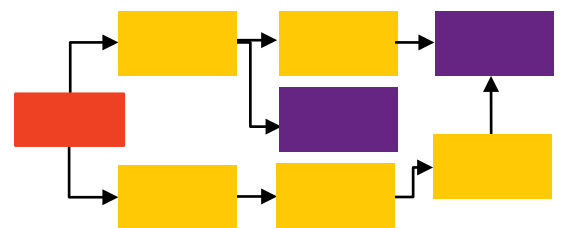# CREATING YOUR THEORY OF CHANGE

NPC's practical guide

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FOREWORD

NPC's theory of change

I first became aware of the term theory of change during NPC's research into campaigning, which led to the publication of *Critical masses* in 2008. It seemed like a valuable concept, capturing a causal model of an organisation's work, and the links between its activities and the outcomes sought. But I met with scepticism from colleagues who feared it would be of little practical value: there was a perception that it was just evaluation jargon.

I am glad to say that this initial scepticism has been found to be entirely unwarranted. Since NPC first began to explore using theory of change to work with charities around impact measurement and strategy, it has become a core component of our work. We have found it to be enormously useful in helping charities to articulate what it is that they do and why: what they are trying to achieve, and how their strategies aim to get them there.

Today, we recommend that all social purpose organisations—charities and funders, social enterprises and investors—build their work on a theory of change. It is at the heart of strategy. It is the foundation for the development of an impact measurement framework. It should be the cornerstone of attempts to work out whether and how well you are achieving your mission. NPC's approach to impact measurement, set out in our *Four pillar report*, is built around the concept of theory of change.

Of course, a theory of change is only as useful as its practical application and we should not get lost in the quest for theoretical perfection. But taken at face value, as a theory to explain how your work is supposed to function, it is immensely powerful. For us in the charity sector, committed to achieving the best possible outcomes for those we aim to serve, it helps test whether our understanding of the world is backed up by what happens in reality. Theories of change, therefore, should not be static—they evolve and improve as our understanding and knowledge is advanced by evidence and observation.

NPC published its first paper on theory of change in 2012, and it has since become our most popular publication, downloaded more than 13,000 times. Theory of change is also our most popular training course, with 169 participants over the last two years. In our consulting we have worked directly with 47 clients to help them develop their own theories of change. While most of this work has been with charities, funders are increasingly seeking our help too. At the same time, we have seen growth in the wider theory of change market: other consultants and advisors have built up their own offerings to help social purpose organisations make use of the concept.

After a long time in development, NPC has also published its own theory of change. This process has helped us to understand the opportunities and the challenges developing a theory of change can present. As an evolving model of our work, it is sometimes hard to know when it is finished. And producing a theory of change is not the same as embedding it throughout our work, and using it to drive our strategy and impact measurement. We are on a journey with theory of change, as is the UK charity sector today.

I am delighted to mark this step with the publication of a new paper on theory of change, sharing the insights we have gleaned through our work with clients and partners. I hope it helps you get an even better grip on what is at the core of your work—what you are trying to achieve, and how you plan to get there.

Tris Lumley, Director of Development, NPC

CONTENTS

GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Having a common language is important when developing a theory of change, so we have included a glossary of the terms we use at NPC. It is worth noting that some of the definitions are contested, and it is not essential that you adopt them precisely. The most important thing is that you understand what we mean in this guide and that when you are developing a theory of change for your organisation or project, everyone shares a common understanding.

Final goal: The broader social change a project or organisation is trying to achieve.

Intermediate outcomes: The short-term changes, benefits, learning or other effects that result from what a project or organisation does. These short-term steps will contribute to a final goal and may include changes in users' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviour. A useful way to think about intermediate outcomes is the outcomes achieved *after the project*—what service users take away from it.

Activities: The things that an organisation or project does or the way it chooses to deliver a project day-to-day. Activities are within an organisation or project's control.

Inputs: The resources that go into the project that a team or organisation needs to be able to carry out its activities.

Outputs: Products, services or facilities that result from an organisation or project's activities. These are often expressed quantitatively; for example, number of users, how many sessions they receive and the amount of contact they had with a project.

Enablers: Conditions or factors that need to be present or absent to allow an organisation or project's work to succeed. The presence or absence of enablers can help or hinder a project. There are two kinds of enablers:

- **Internal enablers** need to exist inside an organisation for a theory of change to work, and are mostly within an organisation or project's control. Internal enablers describe the mechanisms by which an organisation delivers its work (such as the quality of services, relationships and the values and attitudes of staff).
- **External enablers** need to exist in the external environment for a theory of change to work, and are often beyond an organisation or project's immediate control. External enablers describe the context in which an organisation works (such as social, cultural, economic and political factors, laws, regulations, and working with other organisations).

Evidence: Information that you already have or plan to collect that is relevant to supporting or testing a theory of change.

Assumptions: The underlying beliefs about how a project will work, the people involved and the context. These are sometimes implicit in a logic model or theory of change, but it can be useful to state them explicitly.

Finally, two useful resources on terminology are:

- http://www.jargonbusters.org.uk/
- http://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/how-does-theory-of-change-work/glossary/#2

INTRODUCTION TO THEORY OF CHANGE

A theory of change is a tool to help you describe the need you are trying to address, the changes you want to make (your outcomes), and what you plan to do (your activities). The approach can be used for organisations of all shapes and sizes—from service-delivery charities, to campaigning organisations, to funders.

A theory of change is often represented in a diagram or chart, but a full theory of change process involves more than this. It should help you consider and articulate the assumptions and enablers that surround your work and explain why you think your activities will lead to the outcomes you want. It should also challenge you to develop clear aims and strategies and explore whether your plans are supported by evidence. By the end of a theory of change process, you should have a clear idea of what your organisation or project wants to achieve and a strategy to do this.

Charities, funders and social purpose organisations can benefit greatly from creating a theory of change. A range of possible advantages is discussed in the next section of this paper.

Theory of change is actually a very simple concept. Throughout our work and personal lives we have aims, objectives and ideas about how to achieve our goals, but we rarely take the time to think these through, articulate and scrutinise them. All a theory of change process does is to make these assumptions explicit and therefore more testable.

While the idea itself is simple, the terminology around theory of change can be confusing because there are variations in the approach. In this document we use the term to refer to the broad family of approaches that all help to articulate the reasoning behind a project. This includes the CES Planning Triangle[©], logic models, outcomes chains, and narratives. However, others in the field use theory of change to refer only to the outcomes chain approach. As an organisation thinking about using theory of change, the most important thing is not to get bogged down in terminology, but to use the method that suits your needs best.

This guide aims to help you through your theory of change process and support you to produce something that strengthens the design and delivery of your projects, and gives you confidence in your approach to evaluation and learning.

THE BENEFITS OF THEORY OF CHANGE

During our work we have seen first-hand how a theory of change can help an organisation improve its strategy, measurement, communication and partnership working. Below we discuss the benefits a theory of change can bring in each area.

Strategy

- **Help teams work together to achieve a shared understanding of a project and its aims**. The process of agreeing a theory of change teases out different views and assumptions about what an organisation is aiming for and how staff should work together. Using a theory of change to co-develop strategy fosters consensus and can motivate staff, helping them to feel involved and showing them how their work contributes to long-term goals.

- **Make projects more effective**. A theory of change is an agreed statement of what your organisation or project is trying to achieve. It can help you to identify where activities are not contributing to your goals and take action, and understand what information you will need to monitor performance.

- **Help identify and open up 'black boxes' in thinking**. A range of assumptions may underlie the design of your project or approach. The theory of change process should reveal these hidden assumptions, some of which you may then discover are unfounded, out-of-date or inconsistent with the evidence.

Measurement

- **Help determine what needs to be measured (and what does not) so you can plan your evaluation activities**. Some evaluations are misconceived and lack strategy. A theory of change provides a framework for the evidence you should collect, which will give you greater confidence in your approach.

- **Encourage teams to engage with the existing evidence base**. The best theories of change are justified by up-to-date knowledge of what works in a particular field. This could be drawn from your own organisational data and/or research published by others, such as academics and government departments.

- **Act as the basis for claims about attribution**. If, by collecting good quality evidence to test your theory, you can show you have achieved targets and desired changes at each stage, then you have a stronger case for saying that your project has made a difference.

Communication

- **Quickly communicate a project's aims**. A theory of change diagram is a neat way to summarise your work and communicate it to stakeholders, including funders and commissioners. They may also feel more confident in supporting your organisation if they know you have been through a theory of change process.

- **Bring the process of change to the forefront**. All change occurs incrementally through intermediate outcomes (steps which lead towards your final goal), such as improvements in service users' skills or changing public attitudes to disability using a campaign. A theory of change encourages you to focus on these outcomes and articulate them properly.

Partnership working

- **Help with partnership working**. Developing a theory of change in collaboration with other organisations can clarify roles and responsibilities, and establish consistency around outcomes. This could be especially useful for partnership working between statutory and voluntary sector organisations. A theory of change can also help train new staff or volunteers and replicate services, as it shows what a service aims to achieve and how.

HOW TO CREATE A THEORY OF CHANGE

A summary of the process

To develop a theory of change you begin by identifying the group you are working with, setting out their needs and characteristics, and clarifying the final goal[*] that you want to achieve.

The **final goal** should describe the change you want to see in service users or beneficiaries. It should be realistic and succinct; you should not set more than a few final goals, and it is often best to have just one. A final goal should be relatively long-term, obviously beneficial, and something that funders, commissioners or supporters would be interested in funding. It must be relevant to the needs of the target population, and plausibly linked to your project's activities. Your organisation as a whole should articulate its final goal(s), which should be related to your charitable objects and aligned to the goals of individual projects.

Thinking about final goals requires you to consider what your project or organisation is accountable for and what is beyond its sphere of influence. You may decide to choose a grand aim for your final goal, such as 'reducing reoffending' or 'beating cancer'. Clearly, charities working in these areas will aim to achieve these goals, but the extent of success will depend on a wide variety of conditions and factors, many beyond their control. We suggest drawing an **accountability line** between outcomes that you achieve directly and longer-term goals to which these contribute. You will see accountability lines in the charts in this guidance; however, where you draw the line is a matter for your own judgement.

Figure 1: Theory of change elements

Once you have defined your final goal(s) you need to work backwards through the steps or **intermediate outcomes** needed to achieve it. These can be understood as the changes experienced by service users or beneficiaries[†] that will contribute to achieving your final goal. This is perhaps the most important part of the process: too often organisations jump from their activities to their final goals without thinking through the changes that need to happen in between. Intermediate outcomes must be clearly articulated within your theory of change and should be things that your project can definitely influence. Outcomes should be feasible, given the scale of your activities; they should be short-term, but should link logically to your long-term goal(s); and they should ideally be supported by evidence.

At this stage, it is important to put aside any thoughts about how you will measure or evidence the theory of change you are working on. A project should not be designed around what can be measured, and neither should a theory of change. Any questions about future evidence collection should be left until later.

Once you have established your final goal(s) and intermediate outcomes, you need to consider how your **activities** will make this change happen. Take each intermediate outcome in turn and think about how it links to

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[*] We use the term 'final goal'. Other terms which mean the same thing are 'final outcome', 'long-term goal/outcome' and 'vision'.

[†] For most projects, intermediate outcomes relate to change in service users or beneficiaries. However, there are some projects, like professional development, improved partnership working or organisational restructuring, where the intermediate outcomes might relate to changes in staff or volunteers.

your activities. Consider the features that make the activities successful, and whether you have missed out any intermediate outcomes.

You then need to think about enablers: conditions or factors that need to be in place for the project to work. **Internal enablers** need to exist inside your organisation for the theory of change to work. They are mostly within your control, and describe how you deliver your work—for example, the quality of services, relationships, and the values and attitudes of staff. **External enablers** need to exist in the external environment for the theory of change to work, and are often beyond your immediate control. They describe the context in which you work—including social, cultural, economic and political factors, laws, regulations, and working with other organisations.

Throughout the process you should consider what **evidence** already exists that is relevant to your theory of change. Ideally this will be in the form of references to published research, but you could also include your own organisation's experience and data. You may find some evidence that contradicts your theory. It is important to think this through and, if necessary, modify what you do to reflect what the evidence tells you. If you do not have evidence, it is useful to identify your **assumptions** about why one outcome will lead to another.

Only once you have a theory of change that you are broadly happy with should you start thinking about how to measure and evaluate it. This is covered later in this guidance.

Box 1: Key components of a theory of change

A theory of change often uses a diagram or chart to describe a project in visual form. However, this should not be seen as the only element. The best theories of change demonstrate the rationale behind a project and include:

- **An introduction to what a theory of change is** and a description of the process you have been through to create it, including who has been involved.

- **An analysis of the context and situation**, which discusses the background to the project, and outlines the problem in society you are trying to address, your target group, and their needs and characteristics. This is sometimes called a 'situation analysis'.

- **A 'narrative theory of change'**: a written narrative can be used as an alternative, as well as an addition to theory of change diagrams. This is explored in more depth later in this guidance.

- **References to existing evidence that relate to the theory of change**, including evidence that your organisation has already collected, and any relevant published research.

- **Plans for measurement and evaluation that arise from the theory of change**, including the details of what you need to collect to test whether the theory of change is delivered. This is sometimes called a 'measurement framework'.

Factors affecting your approach

You will be faced with several choices around how you approach the theory of change process and how you represent it. There are a number of key factors to consider:

- **The purpose of your theory of change:** Carefully think through why you are doing a theory of change before starting. If your main aim is to build a shared understanding across your team, then it will be important to involve as many people as possible; if you are looking to communicate externally, you will need to work towards a clear summary diagram and put effort into presentation; and if you want to improve your evaluation approach, then you may need to focus on understanding the causal rationale underpinning your activities.
- **Size and complexity of the project:** You should be clear about your scope before you begin. It is possible to produce a theory of change for a whole organisation or a single project or campaign. One approach is to develop a high-level, overall theory of change for an organisation alongside more detailed ones for individual projects.
- **Stage of development:** Some projects are well-established with a robust evidence base, and producing a theory of change will be quite straightforward. Exploratory or innovative projects may require more thought.
- **Direct or indirect impact on service users:** Some projects are processes or system changes; for example, an organisational restructure, a new IT system or a professional development network. These can be more challenging to theorise as the link to end users is indirect, while the intermediate outcomes relate to changes for your colleagues or stakeholders.

Involving people

In NPC's experience, it is nearly always better to engage a range of people when developing a theory of change. This may include practitioners, volunteers, managers, services users and external stakeholders. It is not necessary or efficient to involve everyone with an interest in your work; a group of 3-10 people seems to work well, depending on the size of the project.

You can develop a theory of change either in a workshop or by talking to people individually. Workshops are more efficient and tend to be the most common approach. They need to be facilitated so that everyone feels able to contribute, regardless of their position in the organisational hierarchy.

Developing a theory of change can be a demanding process and people can begin to lose focus after a few hours. We suggest spending between half a day and a day on it at most. You can always reconvene the group later, which will allow time for writing-up, reviewing and taking stock. A theory of change is an iterative process: as well as sending the draft to the people who attended the workshop, you may find it useful to circulate it more widely for further feedback, for example, to senior managers and partner agencies.

> **Box 2: The Ikea effect[1]**
>
> This is the observation that people feel a greater commitment to and ownership of things they have helped to create. We find this is the case with theory of change; the more people you involve at the start, the stronger the commitment to the finished article.

Using existing evidence

A theory of change should be informed by knowledge of what works in a sector and for a particular type of intervention. You should seek to answer the question: why do you think this particular project is the best way to achieve your long-term goal?

To answer, you need to consider the existing evidence to support your assumption that each of your activities contributes to the outcomes you want. You should focus on evidence for causal links between intermediate and final outcomes; this is the hardest thing to measure and therefore where citing external evidence will be most useful. Using existing evidence should help you to understand how the intermediate outcomes you aim for contribute to your final goals.

If there initially seems to be no evidence directly relevant to your project, you can look further afield. There may be evidence from other contexts or work with different types of service users or social problems that could help.

Box 3: Tips on the theory of change process

- Keep it simple! Avoid being too ambitious with your first theory of change.

- In workshops, start by brainstorming or writing on post-it notes to populate a general theory of change and get your group talking. Only move towards specific issues and refinements once everyone has had a chance to speak.

- Set aside time at the end of a workshop to write up notes; bear in mind that this will require time and effort.

- Circulate the draft theory of change map to a wide group of stakeholders. This will help build consensus and support, as well as gather information.

- Your theory of change will never be perfect. Avoid wasting time worrying too much over wording and specific links. The main aim is to produce something that everyone broadly agrees with that is useful for your aims.

- A theory of change should be seen as a working document. You can always update it to reflect learning and new situations.

HOW TO REPRESENT A THEORY OF CHANGE

A diagrammatic representation of a programme or organisation is the centrepiece of most theories of change. This section discusses four ways to approach this:

- **The CES Planning Triangle**[©]
- **Logic model**
- **Outcomes chain**
- **Written narrative**

This chapter includes a description of each approach illustrated by examples, all of which relate to a hypothetical supported housing project for ex-offenders. As you read the description of each approach, you may want to refer back and forth between the diagrams.

Although theory of change approaches differ in appearance and focus, important aspects remain the same. Theories of change should always be built on the key elements of consultation, drawing on existing evidence (if it is available), and backwards mapping from outcomes to activities. They also have similar aims of helping think through strategy, communicate activities and plan evaluation. In this section we outline each approach, so you can decide what is appropriate for your organisation.

Box 4: Beyond the diagram

A theory of change is not only a diagram; it is also the process of thinking through and describing in full how a project should work. The diagram is a representation and a summary.

A good diagram should:

- show a coherent causal model—a clear explanation of the causal processes that you think will lead to your outcomes;
- be logical—each element should plausibly lead to the next; and
- communicate clearly.

The CES Planning Triangle[©]

This is one of the simplest ways to approach a theory of change, and a good place to start if you are new to the method.[2] It is a visual tool, developed by Charities Evaluation Services, which helps to define three key elements of a project: activities, intermediate outcomes, and final goals.

Begin by agreeing your final goal and add this to the top of the diagram—the small amount of space encourages you to keep it short. After this, populate the middle section with intermediate outcomes, asking yourself;

- What needs to change in order to achieve your final goal?
- What changes will your project help to make for your service users or beneficiaries?

Next, add your intermediate outcomes to the middle section of the diagram. These should all be plausibly linked to your project and occur within its lifetime. When developing intermediate outcomes, it is good to use words associated with change, like: more, less, better, and improved. You can also think about intermediate outcomes as the specific aims of your organisation's different projects or interventions.

Finally, at the bottom of the diagram you should list the activities you will deliver to achieve the intermediate outcomes. Each activity should have a direct link to one or more of the intermediate outcomes. If not, ask yourself why the activity is included? It may help to number the outcomes and put the relevant number(s) against each activity. An example of a CES Planning Triangle© for a supported housing project is shown below.

Figure 2: A CES Planning Triangle© for a supported housing project
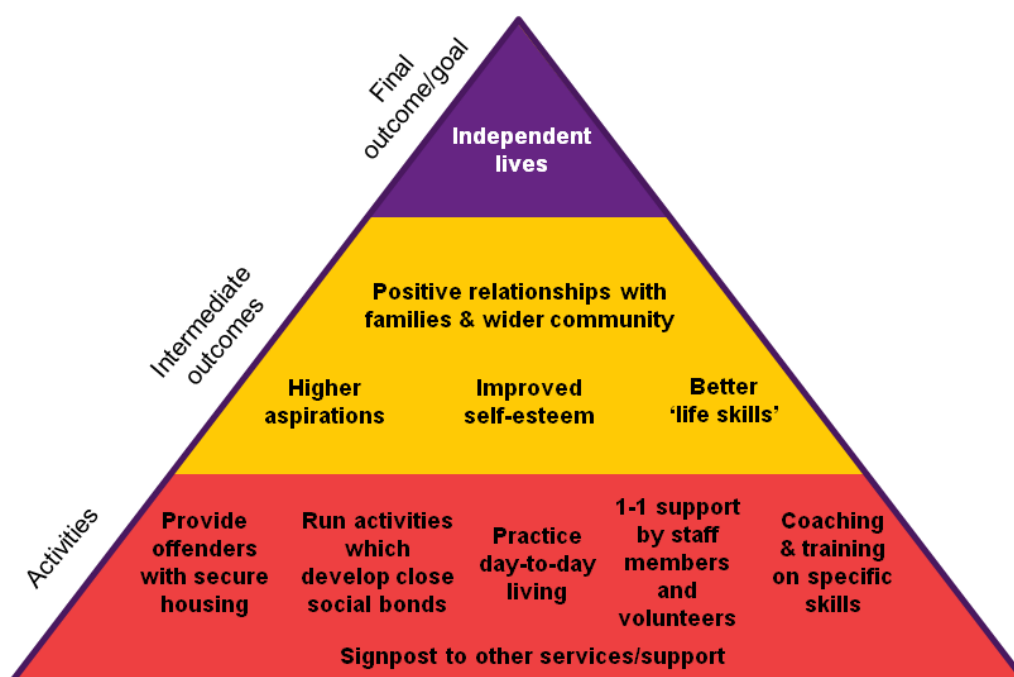
Once the model is complete, you need to think about the indicators you will use to measure whether each element is achieved. We return to the issue of evaluation later in this guidance.

Logic models

A logic model is similar to the CES Planning Triangle© but allows for more detail, particularly about how a project is delivered. Like the previous model, start with your final goal and work backwards to the intermediate outcomes. It is often helpful to break these down into the changes you are trying to make to beneficiaries' knowledge and skills, attitudes and thinking, and behaviours, all of which should logically help them towards the final goal. Once you have agreed your intermediate outcomes you should focus on activities, this time in more detail. You may choose to describe:

- **Inputs:** The resources that go into a project, including the budget, the amount of staff time required, and the relationships with other organisations.
- **Activities:** Activities are what you actually do. A logic model gives you space to break this down into different components: you can describe the assessment process, the steps you take to become familiar with people and build trust, and the schedule of the different activities you deliver. You can also think about *how* you deliver these activities—the unique qualities you bring and what makes your project effective.

- **Outputs:** These are the products, services or facilities that result from an organisation or project's activities. These are often expressed in the quantity of what is delivered; for example, the number of users, how many sessions they receive and the amount of contact you have with them.

- **Enablers**: These are internal or external factors that are key to a project's success. Internal enablers are within your sphere of influence, whilst external enablers are beyond your immediate control.

An example of a logic model for a supported housing project for ex-offenders is shown on the next page.

Box 5: What makes a good logic model?

A logic model should describe the key aspects that make a project work, from inputs through to the final goal. It should be clear so that someone else can see what you have done and replicate it. It should also provide a template for evaluation: data collection should be orientated towards testing whether each element is delivered.
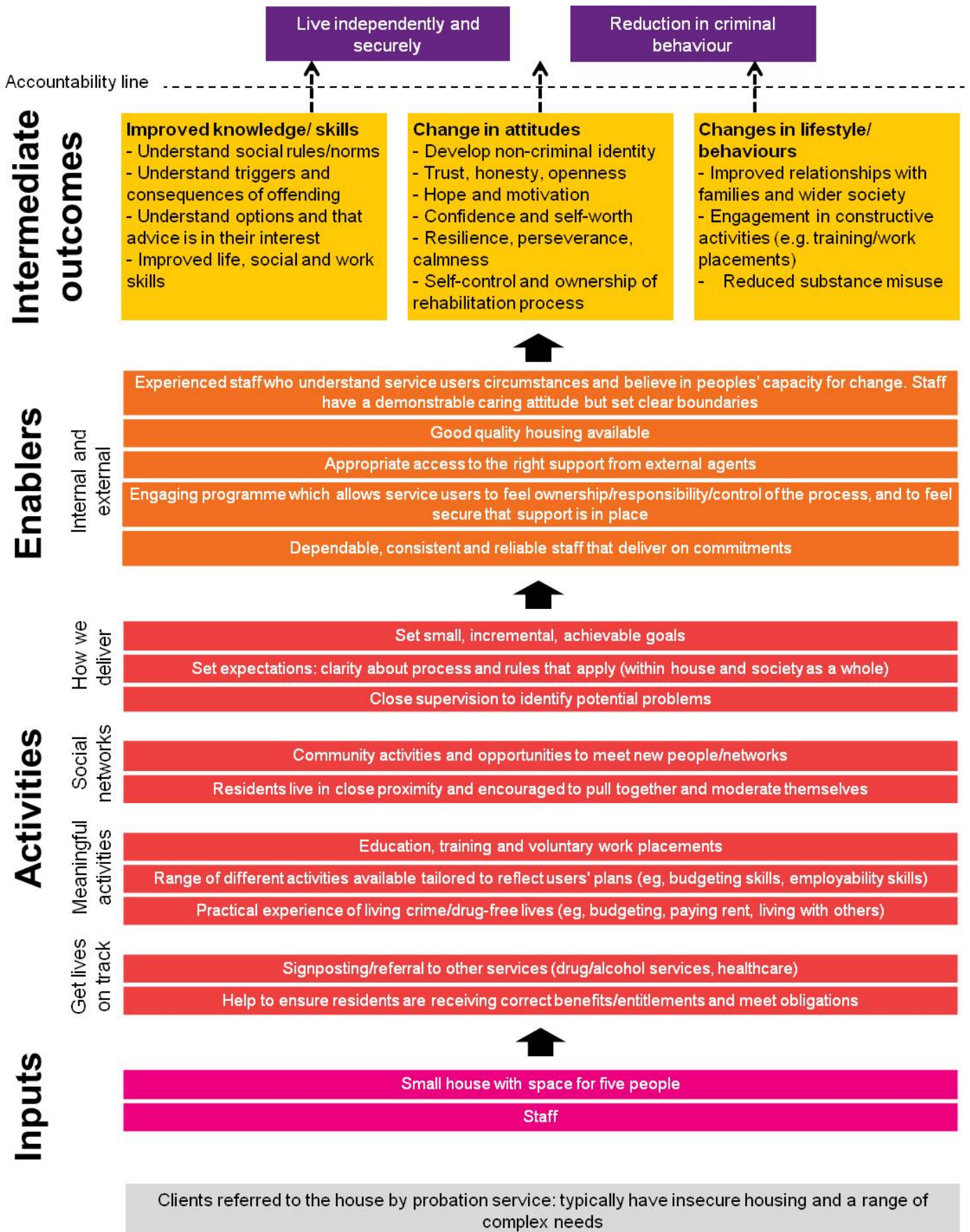
Logic models are straightforward to produce. They include detail about how a project works, and can therefore inform decisions about what to evaluate. They are useful for communication as they represent projects in a compelling way, while the connections between different elements are less complex than those in an outcomes chain (see below). However, there are limitations to both logic models and the CES Planning Triangle©.

Box 6: Limitations of logic models and the CES Planning Triangle©

- The process of creating them can become a pro forma exercise in which people simply catalogue project components without careful consideration of cause and effect.

- They can encourage people to list too many features, not all of which are fundamental to the change process.

- They are not good at showing the dynamic features of a project. They create the impression that inputs and activities happen first, followed neatly by outcomes; in most projects, different aspects occur at different points in time.

- They have limited scope to plot sequences of outcomes and the subtle aspects of causality. For example, in many projects there is an assumption that users will go through a change in knowledge first, leading to a change in attitude and then behaviour, which is harder to reflect through these formats.

These challenges can be overcome by using outcomes chains and narrative theories of change.

Figure 3: Logic model for a supported housing project for ex-offenders

	Live independently and securely	Reduction in criminal behaviour

Accountability line -

Intermediate outcomes

Improved knowledge/ skills
- Understand social rules/norms
- Understand triggers and consequences of offending
- Understand options and that advice is in their interest
- Improved life, social and work skills

Change in attitudes
- Develop non-criminal identity
- Trust, honesty, openness
- Hope and motivation
- Confidence and self-worth
- Resilience, perseverance, calmness
- Self-control and ownership of rehabilitation process

Changes in lifestyle/ behaviours
- Improved relationships with families and wider society
- Engagement in constructive activities (e.g. training/work placements)
- Reduced substance misuse

Enablers

Internal and external

Experienced staff who understand service users circumstances and believe in peoples' capacity for change. Staff have a demonstrable caring attitude but set clear boundaries

Good quality housing available

Appropriate access to the right support from external agents

Engaging programme which allows service users to feel ownership/responsibility/control of the process, and to feel secure that support is in place

Dependable, consistent and reliable staff that deliver on commitments

Activities

How we deliver

Set small, incremental, achievable goals

Set expectations: clarity about process and rules that apply (within house and society as a whole)

Close supervision to identify potential problems

Social networks

Community activities and opportunities to meet new people/networks

Residents live in close proximity and encouraged to pull together and moderate themselves

Meaningful activities

Education, training and voluntary work placements

Range of different activities available tailored to reflect users' plans (eg, budgeting skills, employability skills)

Practical experience of living crime/drug-free lives (eg, budgeting, paying rent, living with others)

Get lives on track

Signposting/referral to other services (drug/alcohol services, healthcare)

Help to ensure residents are receiving correct benefits/entitlements and meet obligations

Inputs

Small house with space for five people

Staff

Clients referred to the house by probation service: typically have insecure housing and a range of complex needs

Outcomes chains

An outcomes chain is the diagram most closely associated with the term 'theory of change'. Outcomes chains differ from the two previous models because they focus more on causality: which activities are linked to which outcomes in what order. In the CES Planning Triangle© and logic models causality is implicit; it is assumed that outcomes flow from the activities listed. An outcomes chain encourages you to think more about how and why change occurs.

The main aim of developing an outcomes chain is to **agree the central rationale for the project** and the conditions needed for success. Doing so should highlight the strategic choices you are making, allowing you to discuss them. Outcomes chains are particularly useful if you are designing a new service, project, or campaign.

Developing an outcomes chain can be challenging because it forces you to think in more detail about the sequence of outcomes, and requires more complicated visual expression than putting words in boxes and listing inputs and activities. However, this effort can help you test and clarify the thinking behind a project.

Box 7: Why is causality important?

Causality is the relationship between an event or events (cause or causes) and a second event or events (effect or effects), where it is understood that the second is a consequence of the first. It is the key evaluation question that social sector organisations face: how do we know our work makes a difference?

NPC has written guidance on comparison group studies, which is one way to address this question; but this approach takes time and can be difficult for many organisations.[3] The next best option is to articulate causal relationships and then test them against the evidence you have—both external evidence that is already available and evidence you collect through your own evaluation work.

Thinking about causality is particularly valuable because it should help your team agree the most important aspects of your service, which will enable you to conduct the best possible evaluation. For more information about causality, refer to *NPC's four pillar approach.*[4]

An outcomes chain focuses on mapping the sequence in which outcomes are intended to occur; by doing so, it allows you to identify what is critical to success. Inputs and activities are summarised without much detail to ensure they do not distract from the main aim of highlighting the key causal processes. Creating an outcomes chain also requires careful consideration of the internal and external enablers needed for success.

To create an outcomes chain begin, as always, by agreeing your final goal and identifying which intermediate outcomes lead directly into it. Ask what causes these intermediate outcomes, and then what in turn causes these causes. You should continue this backwards mapping, focusing on cause and effect, through your work, always ensuring you are capturing the process of change. You may need multiple outcomes chains to reflect different elements of the project and different outcomes, which may be interrelated. Only when you are happy that your outcomes chain captures all the causal relationships required for success across your work should you map your activities onto it to show where they fit.

Causality is complex; mapping it is a challenge. Many things contribute to change for individuals, organisations and society; it can be hard to capture them all in a single diagram. We suggest two ways to meet this challenge.

First, you could develop an outcomes chain that works at a high level. This is illustrated in *Figure 4*, where the main elements of the housing support project are presented in a causal sequence. The diagram does not include a description of how services are delivered; the aim is to simplify so that the main causal relationships are brought to the fore. This high-level outcomes chain should highlight elements that are fundamental to a project's success—especially useful if the aim of the theory of change is to communicate to stakeholders, agree on a broad strategy, and show how a project works.

**Figure 4: General level outcomes chain for a supported housing project**
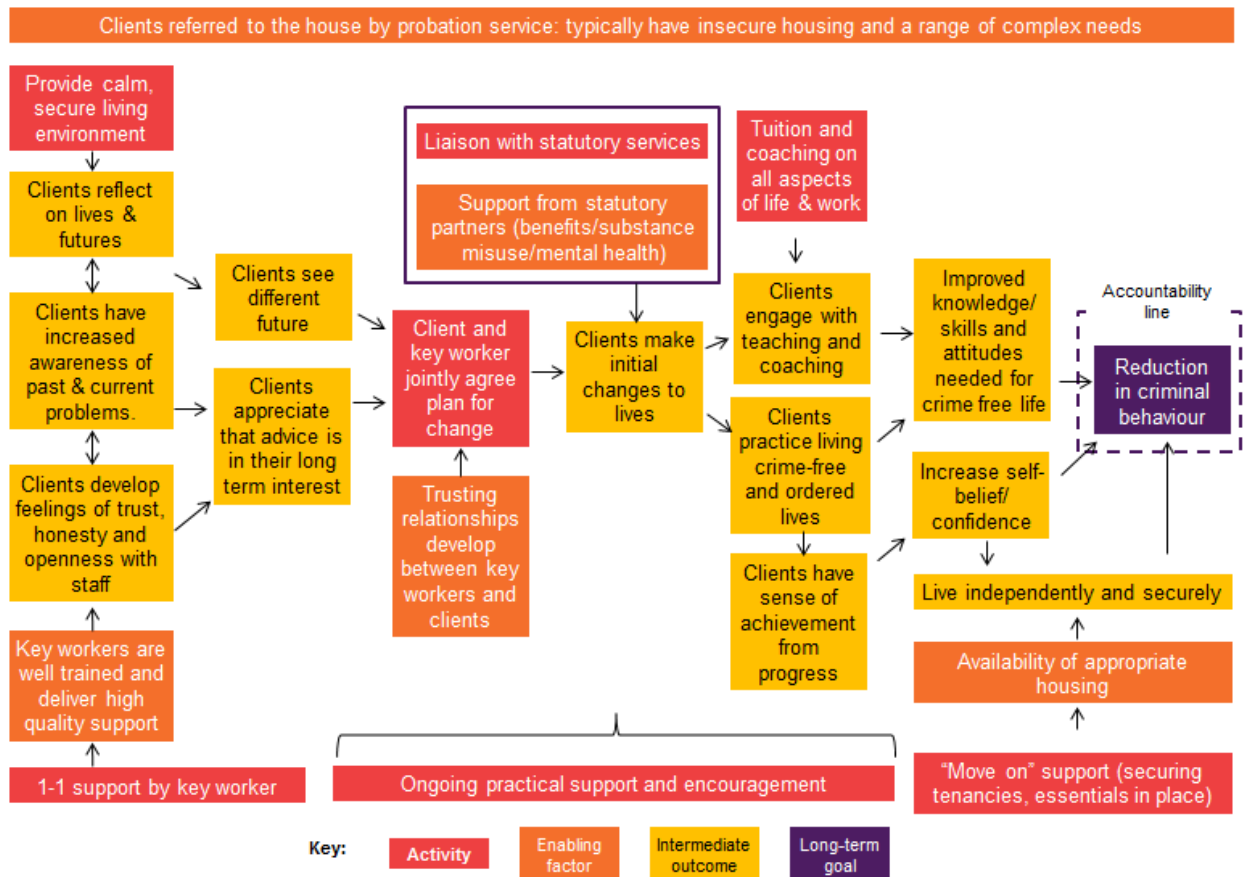
A second, alternative approach is to focus your outcomes chain on specific aspects of a project, or on individual outcomes. This can be better than trying to capture all processes and outcomes in a single diagram, which can take a lot of time and produce a complex chart that is hard to read.

Figure 5 illustrates this approach, showing an outcomes chain that outlines how a supported housing project works to create pro-social, anti-criminal identities. This diagram is still fairly complex, despite only considering one intended outcome of the project.

Figure 5: Specific-level outcomes chain for increasing pro-social identities through supported housing

Key:
- Activity
- Enabling factor
- Intermediate outcome
- Long-term goal
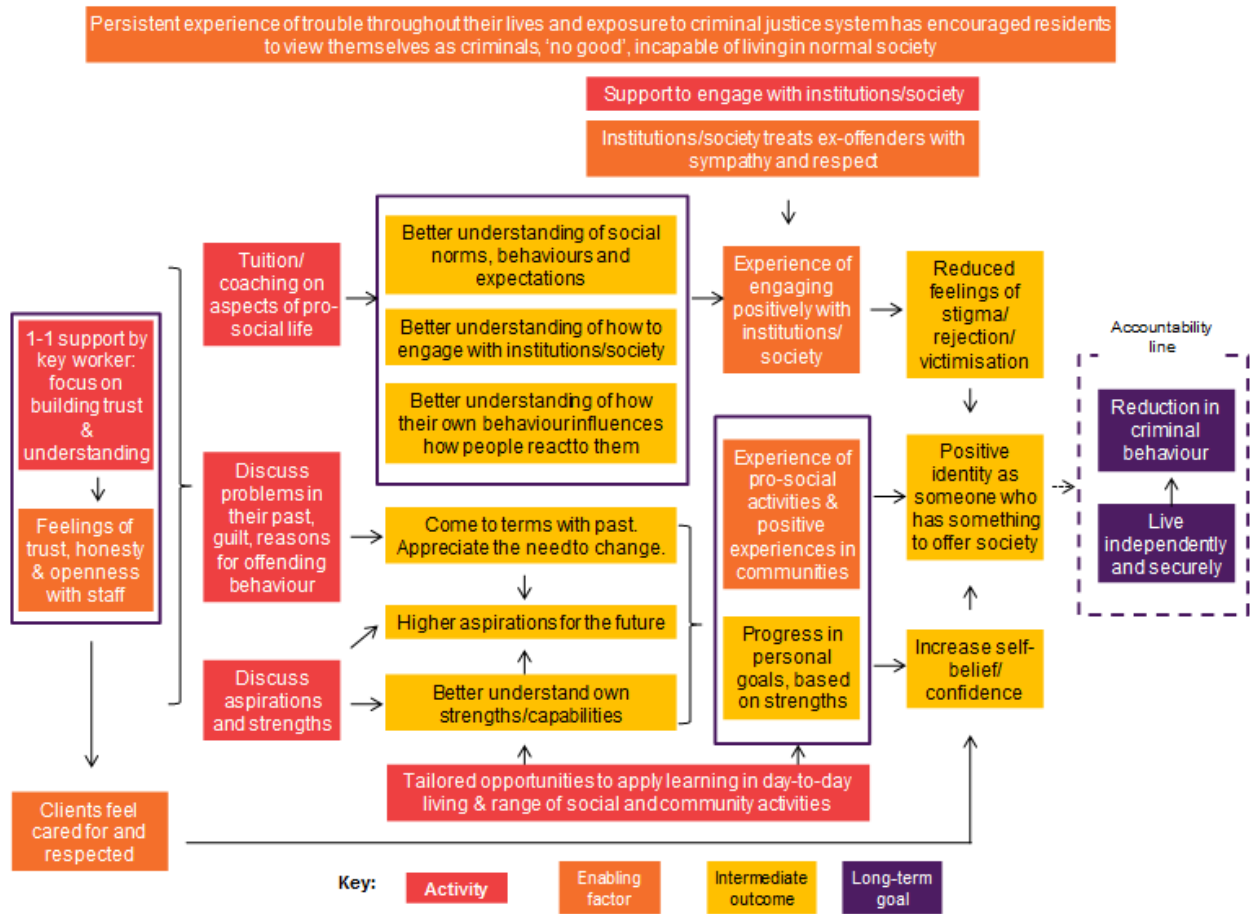
Box 8: Tips for dealing with complexity

Remember that a theory of change is a simplification of reality, and it is impossible to capture everything. You will need to make judgements about what is important to include.

Here are some practical tips:

- Remove some of the detail from your diagram and include it in an appendix or narrative. Outcomes are the most important part of the model, so think about taking out outputs and activities.

- Use references and footnotes to signpost people to more information and evidence.

- Think about expressing your theory of change at different levels of detail. A useful analogy is the view of the earth from space. From high up you can only see the broad shape of things, but as you get closer more detail comes into view. Similarly, you can develop an outcomes chain that shows broad causal links alongside more detailed outcomes chains or logic models that describe specific elements of projects or specific outcomes.

- Think about the sequence of change that a user goes through when they engage in your project or organisation. A good theory of change can often be built around that sequence, with project activities and outcomes mapped to each stage.

Narrative theory of change

Whichever approach you choose, it is always a good idea to describe the theory of change in written form as well. Writing a narrative theory of change can help draw out causal links and organise your thinking. You may also find that writing a narrative challenges what you have included in the diagram and helps to identify elements that are missing.

As well as drawing out causal links, an accompanying narrative provides more detail on the aspects of a theory of change that are central to achieving your intermediate outcomes and final goal(s). Theory of change diagrams can be light on detail, so you should think about other key elements that are important for your theory of change to work. These elements may already be included in the diagram, but this is an opportunity to add detail. Key elements include:

- The **context** in which your organisation and its beneficiaries operate. This could be a description of who your beneficiaries are and why they are engaging in your activities. It could cover wider social, political and economic circumstances. Ray Pawson, professor of social research methodology, has defined four levels of context that might be useful to consider: individual capacities, interpersonal relationships, institutional setting, and the wider infrastructural system.[5]

- The **assumptions** that show why you think one outcome will lead to another. Where academic or your own evaluation evidence is not available, it is useful to identify the assumptions that underpin your theory of change. This can help you understand the causal processes involved and avoid misrepresenting what you are doing and why. If you have identified many assumptions, then prioritise them: include the assumptions that are most critical to success, have the highest risk, are most unstable, you know least about, or have implications for long-term success.

- The **evidence** that shows that your activities achieve your desired outcomes. Where you can, include evidence that supports your activities, as well as evidence that one outcome leads to another. All organisations working for social change want their projects to be successful; as far as possible, activities should be based on knowledge of what works in a particular field. If evidence exists to show that your activities are effective, you should include it; it will add weight to your theory of change.

- The **internal and external enablers** that need to exist for your theory of change to happen. Without enablers, a theory of change cannot happen, so explaining your enablers is important. There may be many enabling factors in your theory of change, but some areas we have found to be particularly important are:

  - The **quality** of a service, activity or campaign. This will have a bearing on how successful you are at achieving your goals. Consider questions such as:

    - How do you work as well as you do?

    - What 'good practice' have you learned and plan to deploy?

    - What is unique, distinctive or special about your project or organisation?

    - What should service users be thinking, feeling, or doing when they receive the service?

  - The process of building **relationships** with service users or beneficiaries. This will likely be pivotal to a project's success. Most social programmes work through their ability to influence and change peoples' choices, so describing how you intend that to happen is key. Similarly, successful campaigns are often determined by the strength of relationships with key stakeholders (such as journalists, politicians or other charities), so engagement of these individuals and groups will also be a determinant of success.

An example of a narrative theory of change for the supported housing project is shown in *Box 9* on the next page.

Box 9: Narrative theory of change for a housing project

Context

- We work with people who have been released from custody with housing problems along with a range of needs and a high risk of reoffending behaviour.

- There are numerous causes of offending behaviour. Direct causes include substance misuse, financial problems, and lack of positive relationships. Indirect causes include criminal identities and attitudes, lack of understanding of social norms, and limited aspirations.

Assumptions

- Providing secure accommodation offers ex-offenders a stable and controlled environment upon which other activities can be based, thereby enabling us to address multiple needs.

- The relatively small number of units facilitates the development of close social bonds and mutual support within the house. This helps people to learn and practice positive relationships with people outside the house, including their families and the wider community. Relationships between staff and residents are crucial to the change process.

- Residents need to develop self-esteem, confidence and resolve. They need to feel positive about themselves and be resilient to setbacks. Change occurs incrementally and is supported across a range of activities and life skills. Continual support is needed to offset setbacks and risks.

- Residents need to develop a non-criminal identity and need to understand the benefits of pro-social behaviour, aspire to a crime-free life and feel themselves capable of living this way.

- With this level of time and effort, individuals with complex needs can be equipped to lead independent, crime-free lives.

Evidence

- Offenders with accommodation problems have been found to be more likely to reoffend.[6]

- High levels of impulsivity have been identified as a significant factor that predicts violent reoffending.[7]

- There is evidence that negative peer influences are a relevant factor in adult reoffending.[8]

- An attitude that supports crime, such as anticipating and evaluating crime as worthwhile, has been found to link to reoffending.[9]

Enablers

- Residents need to develop strong relationships of trust, honesty and openness with staff, which will facilitate the successful delivery of support (internal enabler).

- Success depends on the referral of appropriate people to the house; in particular we are unable to help people until severe mental health or substance misuse use problems are stabilised (external enabler).

- Long-term success depends on the availability of good-quality housing for residents to move into, as well as volunteering, education and work opportunities (external enabler).

Adding detail to a theory of change

The three diagrammatic approaches to theory of change covered in this paper—CES Planning Triangles[©], logic models and outcomes chains—all contain the same elements: activities, intermediate outcomes and final goals. But you can add more detail to your theory of change diagram to make it more compelling. In the previous pages, we have outlined additional elements that can be included in a narrative theory of change. Some of these elements can also be added to theory of change diagrams.

In NPC's experience, the approach most suited to this additional level of detail is the outcomes chain, where the focus is on the sequence of outcomes and causal links. Causality in the CES Planning Triangle[©] and logic models is implicit, rather than drawn out explicitly, which is why some in the field argue that outcomes chains are the 'true' approach to theory of change. For these reasons, the examples in this section are outcomes chains, where we have focused in on sub-elements of the supported housing outcome map.

Assumptions

To make your assumptions explicit, include this detail in additional boxes between outcomes, to show why you think one thing will lead to another. Assumptions can include common sense and intuition.

Figure 6: Highlighting the assumptions in an outcomes chain
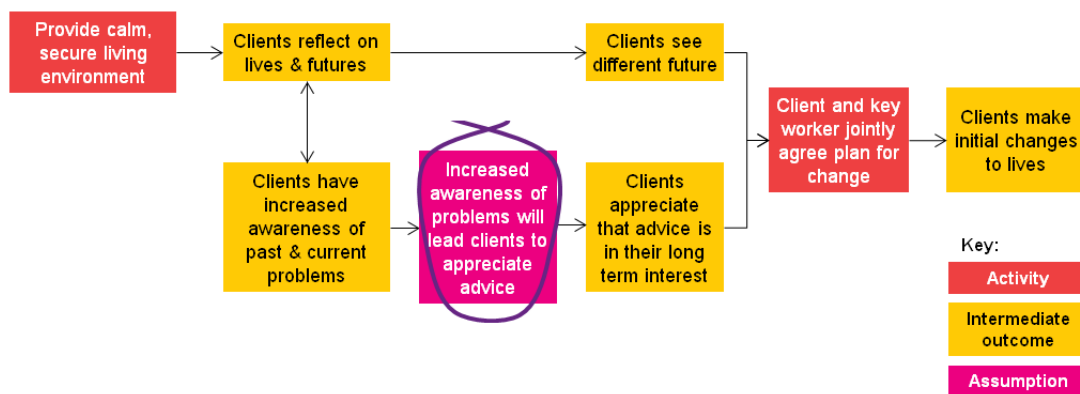
Evidence

Evidence and assumptions are shown in the same colour because they both explain the process of change. If you have to make a choice, include evidence rather than assumptions as it makes a more compelling case for why change occurs. Sources of publicly-available evidence include academic research and government data.
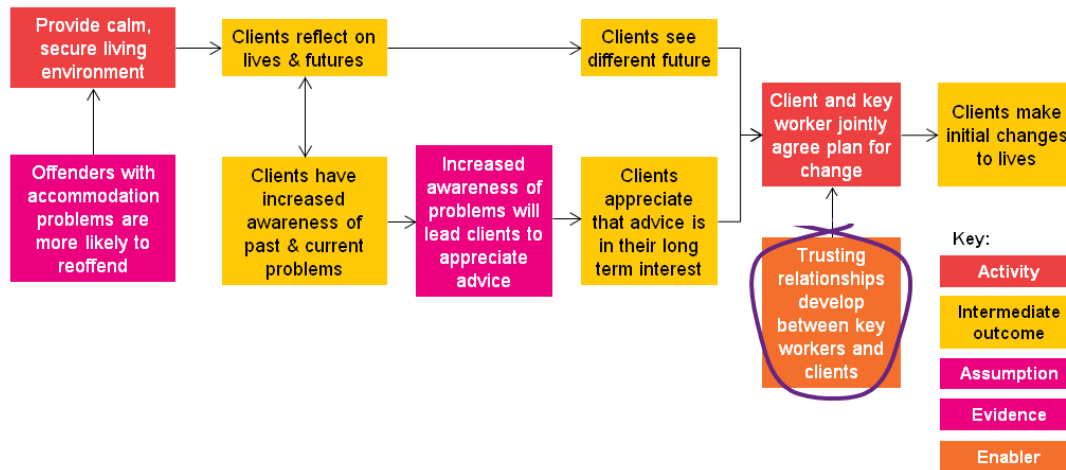
Figure 7: Highlighting the evidence in an outcomes chain
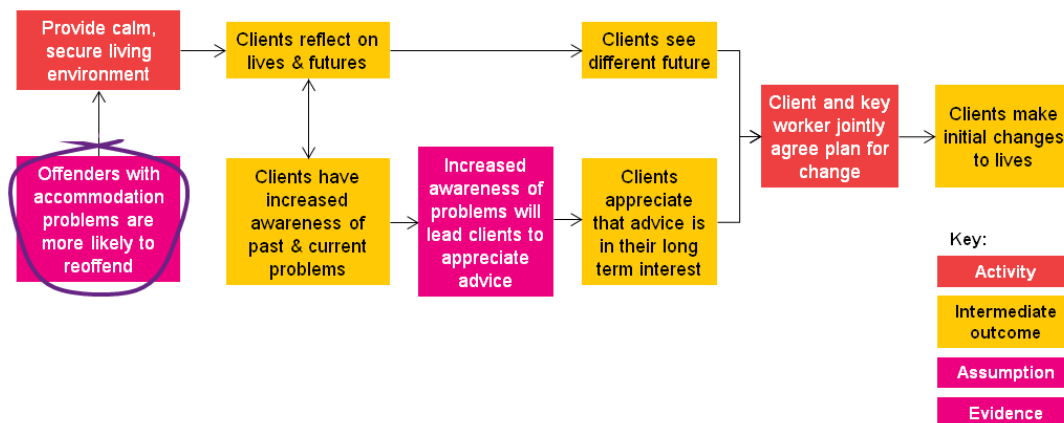
Enablers

Internal and external enablers help ensure that your theory of change happens, so include these where appropriate as additional boxes.

Figure 8: Highlighting the enablers in an outcomes chain

Reviewing a theory of change

Check that your theory of change makes sense by asking yourself if it is:[10]

- **Meaningful**: Does it describe the project or organisation accurately in ways that staff, trustees, volunteers and stakeholders agree with?

- **Well-defined**: Is a clear audience, client or user group articulated? Is it clear what you do?

- **Comprehensible**: Does it enable you to give someone the 'two-minute story' of the service? Would a member of the public understand the theory?

- **Do-able**: Are the services and activities likely to contribute to the desired outcomes and impact?

- **Plausible**: Is it realistic? Does it take into account your organisation's capacity? It should be something that the programme, project or organisation could really do, not just wish it could.

- **Credible**: Are people outside your organisation likely to believe it? Is the secondary evidence you include credible with your stakeholders?

- **Testable**: Can you test the theory through a series of testable hypotheses? All elements should theoretically be assessed using research and observation (even though you may not have the resources to assess this yourself).

Another useful way to test your theory of change is to add in expectations about numbers or flow. For example, you might predict that 100 people will start on the project, 80 will continue to engage, 60 will achieve intermediate outcomes, and 30 will achieve final outcomes. This will help you understand the scale of change to expect, determine whether you have invested resources to achieve the change you want, and assess whether the expected level of outcomes is worth the effort and resources invested.

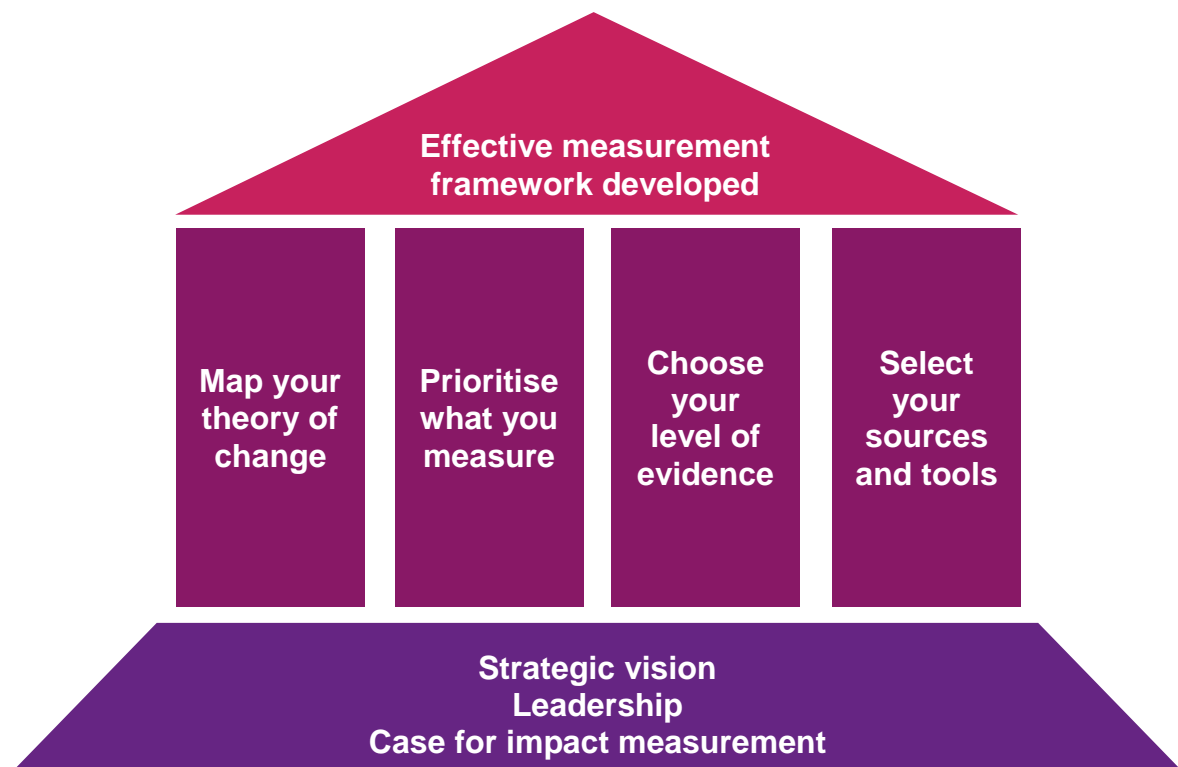# HOW TO USE YOUR THEORY OF CHANGE TO CREATE A MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK

A measurement framework built around your theory of change will ensure you collect information that tells you what difference you are making. Designing this framework will involve deciding what data to collect, the level of rigour of evidence you need, and how to go about collecting this data.

Our method for building measurement frameworks is set out in detail in *NPC's four pillar approach*.[11] This outlines a process that your organisation can work through to build an effective framework to measure the right things in the right way. It aims to provide results that can be used to understand and improve charities' services, as well as report on their progress.

Building an effective measurement framework relies on several key components that need to work together, as illustrated in *Figure 9*. A solid foundation is essential: it requires good leadership and buy-in from senior staff and trustees, a strong commitment to the value of impact measurement, and the investment of time, energy and skills.

Each pillar in the diagram represents a step in the process of creating a measurement framework. Below, we explain each step in more detail.

Figure 9: NPC's four pillar approach

Effective measurement
framework developed

Map your theory of change

Prioritise what you measure

Choose your level of evidence

Select your sources and tools

Strategic vision
Leadership
Case for impact measurement

Step one: Map your theory of change

The first of the four pillars involves mapping your theory of change, which we have already discussed in detail. Starting with your final goal and working backwards to develop a theory of change provides clarity, revealing the causal links between what you do and what you are trying to achieve. It gives you a coherent framework on which to base your measurement efforts and ensures your data collection is structured, rather than ad hoc and opportunist.

Step two: Prioritise what you measure

Prioritise the most important outcomes in your theory of change and focus on measuring those. Your impact is likely to be diffuse, affecting different people in different ways over different time frames; trying to capture all these changes is complicated and may not be the best use of limited resources. Do not be tempted to collect data that is convenient—just because something is easy to measure, does not mean it is important. Remember to consider data on the possible negative unintended consequences of your work too; this will help you to improve.

To decide which outcomes to measure, ask yourself two questions:

1. **Has anyone already proved the causal link between outcomes in your theory of change?**

   If so, you can use desk research to gather this evidence rather than collect new data. For example, an organisation that aims to reduce re-offending may have 'reduced negative peer influences' as an outcome in its theory of change. There is already research to help demonstrate causal links between reduced re-offending and reduced negative peer influences, so in this case the organisation could choose to focus on measuring other outcomes.

2. **Is it really important for you to have data on this outcome?**

   You need to prioritise the most important outcomes. These will inevitably need to reflect the outcomes that your stakeholders, especially funders, see as important. Nevertheless, they should also be outcomes that:

   - you **directly** influence (rather than **indirectly** support);
   - are **important** or **material** to your mission;
   - are not too **costly** to measure; and
   - will produce **credible** data.

This questioning process will help you prioritise a set of outcomes to measure. These outcomes form the basis of your measurement framework.

Step three: Choose your level of evidence

Before you begin measuring you must choose an appropriate level of rigour for evidence of your impact that suits the needs of your stakeholders. This is not straightforward and there is no 'one size fits all': it will depend on your own needs, resources and capabilities, and those of your audience. For example, funders may want a certain level of rigour for a project they have funded. Finding the right balance will depend on a number of factors: while you may want to create strong evidence of your impact, you will be limited by resources, and by practical and methodological constraints. Basing your measurement framework on your theory of change can help steer you in the right direction and avoid either under-investing or over-investing in measuring your impact.

There are four main ways to make a credible case that what you do really makes a difference:[12]

1. **Statistical** approaches look for patterns in quantitative data to see if the effect (ie, the expected outcomes) frequently follows the cause (ie, the service). Such approaches include before and after comparisons, correlation, regression analysis, and other statistical models.

2. **Experimental** approaches compare differences in outcomes between people who receive a service (the intervention group) and those who do not (the control group). The most rigorous way to select a control group is to randomly choose who receives the service and who does not in a randomised control trial (RCT). Any differences in the outcomes of the control group can be attributed to the service or to chance using statistics. This approach helps distinguish a project's impact from other factors that might affect the outcomes. The most common criticism around RCTs are the cost involved and ethical concerns about denying people a service.

3. **Case-based** approaches compare cases (eg, individuals, groups of people, or places) *within* an intervention or programme or *across* interventions or programmes, to draw conclusions about causes of the effects and the impact of programmes. This approach recognises that there is rarely a single cause to any social outcome and that it is hard to unpick all the various influences.

4. **Theory-based** approaches describe in detail how a service or programme influences different people at different times and places using observations by staff, evaluators, and other stakeholders, as well as the views of beneficiaries, rather than by analysing lots of cases or using a control or comparison group.

These different types of evidence are not mutually exclusive; they can be combined to bolster your claims that a project or service makes a difference.

Step four: Select your sources and tools

Once you have identified the level of evidence you require, you must decide what data you need and find tools or data sources to capture it. You may find an existing tool or data source, or you may need to develop one. Do not feel the need to reinvent the wheel: consider what tools are already available, and think about existing evidence for the causal links in your theory of change. It is important to use measurement tools that are fit for purpose and that capture the change you want to bring about.

The outcomes you prioritise and your decision about how rigorous your evidence needs to be will determine the type of data you should collect and how you should go about it. There are three key questions to answer:

- **Who do you need to collect data from?** Who you collect data from should reflect the groups your organisation interacts with—the beneficiaries of a service, staff members, practitioners using your resources, or policymakers you are trying to influence. It may also be appropriate to consider groups with whom you have indirect contact, such as beneficiaries of an organisation that you directly support. Tracking a sample of people rather than everyone you work with cuts costs without sacrificing the quality of the evidence. This is a must if you work with a large number of people.

- **What type of data should you collect?** Data is most commonly categorised as quantitative or qualitative. Quantitative data helps you to determine whether change has taken place, while qualitative data helps you to understand why and how. Quantitative data is aggregated evidence of the extent of the impact you are having. Qualitative data, including case studies, is more effective in communicating the detail of what has or can be achieved and how. The data types are complementary, and NPC promotes the collection of both where possible, bearing in mind the mantra: '*No numbers without stories; no stories without numbers.*'

- **When should you collect this data?** A key decision to make is when and how often to collect data. Resources, funder requirements and the types of activities you carry out, as well as methodological and practical considerations, will all influence this decision. You will need to think about collecting baseline data before an intervention takes place so you have a point of comparison for assessing your project or organisation's impact. You should also consider when you will collect the data—a common pattern is to collect data before and after an intervention—and whether and when to follow up.

The final stage in developing your measurement framework is identifying how to get your data—the approach you take and tools you use to collect it. First, you should think about what data already exists and how to use that where possible. Then you can identify new sources of data and find or develop appropriate tools to collect it. *Figure 10* presents a number of issues to consider when choosing the best tool for you.

Figure 10: Choosing tools

Area	What to consider when choosing tools	NPC's tips when choosing tools
Outcomes	• What is the mix of 'soft' or 'hard' outcomes in your work? • Does the tool fit the outcomes you want to measure? • Can you both measure change and understand why change has happened?	• Choose standardised and validated tools where you can. • Try to get hold of existing administrative/ statutory data for hard outcomes. • Use quantitative tools to measure change and qualitative tools to discover how change happens.
Activities/ intervention	• Do you work with people over a long period of time? • Do you work with people one-to-one or in an intensive way? • Is your service innovative or established? • Are you trying to scale your approach?	• Consider how you might follow up with people in the long term, such as contacting a random sample or using statutory data. • Resource-intensive tools may not be appropriate for light-touch interventions. • If you are delivering a new activity or trying to scale you should invest in a robust approach to measuring your impact.
Beneficiaries/ stakeholders	• How accessible are your users/beneficiaries/stakeholders? • How easy is it to get a representative sample? • How easy is it for respondents to take part in research?	• Consider secondary data sources for beneficiaries/stakeholders who are not accessible. • Ensure tools are tested for the population you work with—eg, older people, people with learning difficulties.
Time and resources	• How can you minimise the collection of new data (ie, using existing evidence and data collected by others)? • What resources are available to collect, use, and analyse data?	• Identify a lead in your organisation to drive measurement of your impact. • Recruit someone with relevant skills and experience as needed. • Research tools that others in your sector use rather than reinventing the wheel. • Make use of training, free tools and guidance. • Consider sharing measurement with other organisations to reduce costs.
Need for rigour	• What is widely accepted in your sector? • What is your appetite for rigour? • Are tested tools available for outcomes you seek?	• Look for shared measurement and common tools to increase rigour. • Research availability of tools before developing your own.
Funders	• What is your funder's appetite for evidence? • Are your priorities for measurement aligned with your funder's? • Are your different funders asking you for different information?	• Talk to your funders to understand their priorities. • Talk to funders who ask for information that is not a priority for you. • Work with funders to reduce duplication in reporting. Consider developing a shared measurement approach with charities and funders in your sector to streamline reporting.

HOW TO USE YOUR THEORY OF CHANGE TO LEARN AND IMPROVE

Once you have developed a theory of change, described how it is supported by existing evidence, and collected your own evidence, you can determine whether you have achieved the outcomes you intended. You will also be in a position to learn from your results and improve your services.

Theory of change should be at the heart of your strategy, and should be a living document. Whether your impact measurement results are good or show room for improvement, organisations in the social sector should be constantly striving to improve their services and do better for the people they serve. This is why learning and improving are so important.

There are two key ways that you can use your results to help achieve better outcomes for beneficiaries:

1. improving your **own services**; and
2. improving **the sector** through sharing your learning more widely.

Improving your services

In a nationwide survey conducted by NPC in 2012, charities told us that the greatest benefit of measuring their impact was improved services.[13] To make improvements, you will need to critically reflect on the data you have collected and analysed. Two key questions to ask yourself are:

- What do your results say you are doing well?
- What do your results say about what you need to improve?

To think about practical ways to improve your work, consider:

- Are you delivering the right services?
- Are you targeting your services at the right people?
- Are there any gaps in your services?
- Are there any unintended consequences?
- Are some of your services more effective than others?
- Would it make sense to allocate resources differently?

For example, if you find that one-to-one support from key workers is improving the aspirations and self-awareness of female ex-offenders, but not their male peers, think about why this might be happening and what you can do to address it.

You should also consider whether you have sufficient data to allow you to answer these questions—are you measuring the right things? As you develop a better understanding of how your activities and outcomes link together, could you update your theory of change to more accurately reflect this?

It is important that your organisation has a culture of continuous learning and improvement. If you decide to make changes to your services, you should continue to assess your results to see if these changes are working and delivering outcomes. One way to embed learning within an organisation is to give a member of your board or

senior management team responsibility for ensuring you regularly review and act on results data. It is also important to engage frontline staff and show them that the data they gather is put to good use—share results with them, and show how you are using the information to improve services.

Improving the sector

As well as improving your own services, by sharing your results you can help the sector you work in to become more effective. Charities, funders and social purpose organisations exist to help people, so building the evidence base on what works is essential.

Sharing with partner organisations

One of the easiest ways to start is to share results with partner organisations. Look at your theory of change and think about which of your outcomes rely on working with partners. Discuss with them how you can share results to help understand how you can best support your beneficiaries. For example, can your combined results help you better understand whether referral processes are working and for whom?

Sharing more widely

As well as sharing findings with partners, share them with other organisations in your field. If you are a charity, share your results with your funders. If you have found that a particular approach works, or indeed if you know that something does not work, it is important to let people know.

Using shared measurement

If a shared measurement framework has been developed for your field, then consider using it. Shared measurement frameworks include shared outcomes and standardised measures, enabling organisations to measure their impact and compare their results. The Journey to EmploymenT (JET) framework is an example of a shared measurement framework where users have described how it has saved them time and money, as well as improving the standard of their measurement.[14] By sharing results that are comparable at a sector level, it is possible for us to really begin to understand what works and why.

How NPC can help

Our regular training sessions allow you to dedicate a day to understanding theory of change, so you can choose the right approach and make a start on your own, with our experts on hand to answer any questions—check the events section of our website for the latest dates. We can also work with you in depth to develop a theory of change as a basis for clarifying strategy, measuring your impact or thinking about your place in the sector. Do get in touch at info@thinkNPC.org for more information.

FURTHER RESOURCES

We have selected further online resources to support you in creating a theory of change.

- NPC's introduction to theory of change and the origins of the technique:

  http://www.thinknpc.org/publications/theory-of-change/

- Charities Evaluation Services' introduction, *Making Connections*:

  http://www.ces-vol.org.uk/tools-and-resources/Evaluation-methods/making-connections-tools

- A range of useful resources from the Better Evaluation site:

  http://betterevaluation.org/plan/define/develop_logic_model

- The SIB group's video summary:

  http://www.sibgroup.org.uk/impact/help/plan/

- A US website with a range of resources on theory of change:

  http://www.theoryofchange.org/

- A Prezi looking at the issue of developing theories of change for complex projects:

  http://prezi.com/cjutwzfsfspe/theory-of-change-for-complex-interventions_mary-de-silva/

- Guidance on how to use a theory of change to help you write up findings:

  http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/175356/0116687.pdf

- A short guide on developing a theory of change by Project Oracle:

  http://www.bvsc.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Project-Oracle-Standard-1-training-Theory-of-Change-Step-by-step-guide.pdf

- A very good introduction to the subject:

  http://www.wkkf.org/resource-directory/resource/2006/02/wk-kellogg-foundation-logic-model-development-guide

- NPC's regular training sessions on theory of change:

  www.thinkNPC.org/events

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[13] Ní Ógáin, E., Lumley, T. and Pritchard, D. (2012) _Making an impact: Impact measurement among charities and social enterprises in the UK_. New Philanthropy Capital.

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TRANSFORMING THE CHARITY SECTOR

NPC is a charity think tank and consultancy which occupies a unique position at the nexus between charities and funders, helping them achieve the greatest impact. We are driven by the values and mission of the charity sector, to which we bring the rigour, clarity and analysis needed to better achieve the outcomes we all seek. We also share the motivations and passion of funders, to which we bring our expertise, experience and track record of success.

Increasing the impact of charities: NPC exists to make charities and social enterprises more successful in achieving their missions. Through rigorous analysis, practical advice and innovative thinking, we make charities' money and energy go further, and help them to achieve the greatest impact.

Increasing the impact of funders: NPC's role is to make funders more successful too. We share the passion funders have for helping charities and changing people's lives. We understand their motivations and their objectives, and we know that giving is more rewarding if it achieves the greatest impact it can.

Strengthening the partnership between charities and funders: NPC's mission is also to bring the two sides of the funding equation together, improving understanding and enhancing their combined impact. We can help funders and those they fund to connect and transform the way they work together to achieve their vision.

www.thinkNPC.org