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Taking an evidence-based approach to funding criminal justice projects

Over the last eight years, The Robertson Trust has invested over £7 million in criminal justice projects across Scotland. This article outlines our journey as we have moved towards becoming an evidence-based funder and some of our learning from funding and evaluating these projects.

Christine Scullion

The Robertson Trust

The Robertson Trust is Scotland's largest independent grant making Trust. Every year it funds a wide range of third sector organisations across the country. It was established in 1961 by the three Robertson sisters, Elspeth, Agnes and Ethel, who donated their shares in their family business, Edrington, to the Trust for charitable purposes. To date, the Trust has given more than £150 million to charities in Scotland, with over £16 million awarded in 2013/2014.

In addition to our main grant scheme, the Trust also works proactively within a small number of development areas, including criminal justice. In these we aim to make a significant investment in programmes and projects over an extended period of time to develop the evidence-base about what works, what doesn't work and why. We then use this evidence to influence policy and practice at a local and national level.

Our development approach

Through our Development Awards, the Trust tries to focus on hard issues that no-one else is looking at and identify gaps in service provision where our support can make a difference. For example, ten years ago we identified a significant gap in support for offenders serving short-term sentences of less than four years, so began investing in voluntary throughcare services for this group. Today, there is a wide range of voluntary throughcare services operating across Scotland and this is a key area that the Scottish Government is focusing on in Phase 2 of the Reducing Reoffending Programme (RRP2).

The Trust now begins its development work by undertaking research to identify the existing evidence-base within an area, including looking at international research and studies. We then set up an advisory group to consider this research and establish a funding programme to test out some of the approaches that evidence suggests may prove effective.

Partnership working is integral to this: we bring together key stakeholders from the public sector and third sector at the start to agree shared outcomes for this work, co-design the programme and begin to look at how the work can be sustained in the long term. We then identify and fund third sector organisations to deliver specific interventions within local communities across Scotland. Increasingly, we fund these programmes in partnership with other organisations.

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While supporting organisations to make a positive difference to their service users' lives is a key outcome of our Development Awards, it is not the only one. We also aim to use the learning from these programmes to increase knowledge of 'what works' within these areas and ultimately to ensure that this knowledge is reflected in future policy and practice in Scotland. Although we would like to see the high quality services we support being mainstreamed, it is more important to us that the learning from their work is sustained and used to improve services so that it benefits as many people as possible.

Becoming an Evidence-Based Funder

Evaluation plays a key role in our development work. All of our development projects are externally evaluated or receive support to undertake self-evaluation, or both. These have two aims: (i) to help organisations understand and demonstrate the impact of their services better and (ii) to identify areas of

good practice within projects and contribute to the evidence-base about 'what works'. Increasingly, we build 'learning sets' into all of our new development programmes where we work with Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS) to improve organisations' self-evaluation skills. An example of this is the 'Families Affected by Imprisonment' Learning Set that we are running with eight organisations over the next two years to empower them with the knowledge, skills and tools they need to measure the impact of their services.

In 2013 we worked with the Scottish Government's Justice Analytical Services (JAS) to improve our approach to evaluation, as part of the Scottish Government's Analytical Exchange Programme. When we initially approached JAS, we hoped they would help us to undertake economic evaluations of some of the criminal justice projects we were supporting. However, we quickly learned that before we could even begin to look at economic evaluation, our impact evaluations would need to be more robust. JAS has reviewed all of the evaluations we had commissioned over eight years and provided some very constructive feedback about their strengths and weaknesses. A key question they challenged us to consider, was what we wanted to gain from these evaluations? Did we want to use these evaluations to prove that a project was working or to use it to fully analyse and understand which aspects were working, which weren't working and why? They also provided us with guidance about what evaluations can and cannot be used to demonstrate and how to make the evidence in them more relevant, useful and persuasive.

We have also benefited from JAS's 'Reducing Reoffending Evaluation Resource Pack' which outlines four steps for designing and evaluating criminal justice interventions:

1. review the existing evidence about 'what works' in reducing reoffending;
2. draw a logic model describing how the intervention works and show the links between inputs, outputs and outcomes;
3. identify indicators and collect relevant monitoring data;
4. analyse data to understand if the inputs, outputs and outcomes have taken place as planned (Scottish Government, 2013).

The Trust has found this resource invaluable and it has strongly influenced our current approach to funding and evaluating projects. We are now working alongside JAS, ESS, the Criminal Justice Voluntary Sector Forum and other stakeholders to promote the use of this model amongst service providers, policy makers and commissioners to help the sector move towards a consistent, evidence based approach to designing, funding and evaluating criminal justice services going forward.

Key learning

Through our long-term investment in criminal justice, we have developed a growing evidence base about 'what works' to reduce reoffending and the valuable contribution that third sector organisations make to this agenda. In 2012, we published a paper on behalf of the Scottish Third Sector Research Forum which identified the third sector's responsiveness, flexibility, commitment and ability to form relationships with offenders as being integral to their success (The Robertson Trust, 2012, pp.3-4).

The 'Breaking the Cycle' programme, funded in partnership with Serco, is one example of our investment in criminal justice. Launched in 2008, the £1 million programme has supported the development of five demonstration projects across Scotland that provide throughcare support to offenders receiving short-term sentences. These include Barnardo's 'Plan B' project, Access to Industry's 'Passport' project, Station House Media Unit's 'Adjust' project and Centrestage's 'Catalyst' project (links below). In summary, we found that:

- ❖ Throughcare services are more likely to be effective if they engage with offenders at the point of custody, continue to work with them after release from prison and assign a designated worker who acts as a consistent point of contact;
- ❖ It can take a significant amount of time to embed new services in prisons and to develop a shared understanding of the services' aims and objectives amongst prison staff, delivery agencies and service users;
- ❖ It is vital to take a multi-agency approach when developing and delivering services and to ensure services such as housing and health are involved in this process (The Robertson Trust, 2014).

Another significant development over the last two years has been our involvement in the Reducing Reoffending Change Fund (RRCF) in which we have invested £2 million, and have project managed the six RRCF Public Social Partnerships (PSPs) on behalf of all the funders. As part of this work, we have organised two successful networking events that have provided a forum for the PSPs to come together and discuss best practice and challenges around providing mentoring support to offenders. While RRCF has been a challenging process, it has helped to bring together independent funders, third sector practitioners, policy makers, analysts and commissioners across the sector in a more coordinated way. This is an exciting development in criminal justice and one that the Trust hopes to see, and help replicate, in other sectors.

Access to Industry Passport Prison Leavers Programme:
<http://bit.ly/1rwl2Aa>

Adjust: <http://www.shmu.org.uk/adjust>

Centrestage Catalyst: <http://bit.ly/1lZZlm4>

Evaluation Support Scotland:
<http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/>

The Robertson Trust (2012), *Why Involve the Third Sector in Reducing Reoffending*. http://www.therobertsontrust.org.uk/index.php/download_file/view/385/

The Scottish Government (2013), *Reducing Reoffending Evaluation Pack*. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0043/00439829.pptx>

The Robertson Trust (2014), *Evidence Paper: Breaking the Cycle*. http://www.therobertsontrust.org.uk/index.php/download_file/view/407/

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