About Families:
what have we learned about evidence to action?

about
families

gathering evidence • informing action

Highlights

Those who had been involved in the project told us how it had helped them, and what they had learned:

Relevance: identifying topics in direct response to challenges reported by service users and providers meant that evidence sought was relevant and meaningful.

Research gaps: identifying gaps in the evidence available to inform service development and delivery was valued by service providers and academics.

Accessible evidence: consolidating relevant research evidence in one place, in an easily accessible format, was highly valued by researchers and practitioners.

Independence: About Families' neutral stance on evidence, and ability to be a 'critical friend', was valued.

Increasing engagement: supporting stakeholders to reflect on evidence increased their ability to assess and engage with evidence. This process of taking evidence into action can be subtle and takes place over time.

Supporting organisations: supporting services by both raising awareness around evidence and its implications for service delivery, and by developing their capacity to utilise evidence to inform thinking and practice, was central to using evidence in service planning and delivery.

Affirming practice: accessing evidence which affirms practice was felt to be valuable, and helped to share understanding with wider stakeholders.

Clear process: a clear process for supporting service providers to reflect on and apply evidence was important. Designing plans which explicitly use and reflect back to the evidence can help to keep the evidence-base in sight.

Partnership: partnership working facilitated engaging practitioners with evidence, and encouraged links both within and between organisations and across sectors.

Service-led development: involving service users in service planning was a new and positive experience for many partners, suggesting that this is an untapped and highly useful source of evidence.

About the project

The About Families partnership sought to ensure that the changing needs of parents, including families affected by disability, are met by providing accessible and relevant evidence to inform services. Over three years (2010 – 2013), About Families identified and investigated four key parenting topics and used an innovative 'evidence to action cycle' model to support a range of organisations and services to use evidence, and consult with service users, to inform service development. The project also piloted an Evidence Bank, which produced concise evidence reviews in direct response to family and disability service related research questions.

The topics were:

1. **Parenting Teenagers: relationships and behaviour (October 2010)**

2. **Together and Apart: supporting families through change (June 2011)**

3. **Parenting on a Low Income (March 2012)**

4. **Parenting and Support (October 2012)**

A 'mini-topic' on kinship care was also devised to complement the other topics and to explore how they could relate specifically to kinship care families.

This report shares reflections and learning from the experience of using the evidence to action model and an independent evaluation with project stakeholders.

Case studies of evidence into action development work can be found in the About Families Project Report.

About Families was a partnership between:

The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR)

Capability Scotland

Parenting across Scotland (a consortium of parenting and relationship organisations: Aberlour Childcare Trust, Capability Scotland, CHILDREN 1st, One Parent Families Scotland, Relationships Scotland, SMC, and Scottish Adoption).
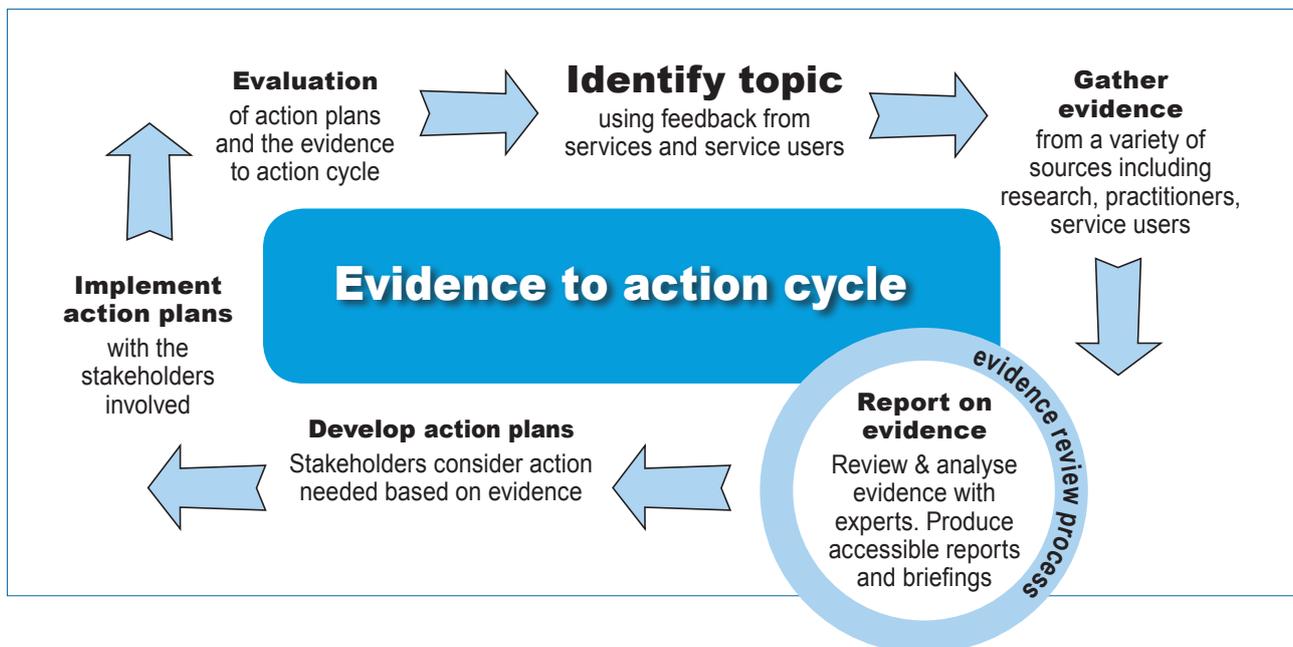
It was funded by the National Lottery through the Big Lottery Fund.

Full topic reports, and the project report, can be downloaded at

http://aboutfamilies.org.uk

Evidence to action cycle

Evaluation of action plans and the evidence to action cycle

Identify topic using feedback from services and service users

Gather evidence from a variety of sources including research, practitioners, service users

Implement action plans with the stakeholders involved

Develop action plans Stakeholders consider action needed based on evidence

Report on evidence Review & analyse evidence with experts. Produce accessible reports and briefings

evidence review process

Evidence to action

About Families developed an innovative 'evidence to action' process to enable service delivery to be informed by relevant, reliable evidence.

Topics were selected in response to challenges facing parents using family support services run by the partners, including those who call ParentLine Scotland. A range of evidence on each topic was gathered and communicated through accessible reports and briefings and discussion. The issues from these reports were explored with a range of stakeholders through participative events and a Community of Practice. All evidence reports were reviewed by relevant academics and service professionals.

Following discussion events, About Families worked with some stakeholders to apply findings to their services. This was done by creating and implementing action plans to develop services using a range of planning tools, and thinking about how to involve service users in these developments. An emphasis was placed on supporting and facilitating this process to increase organisations' capacity to use evidence in practice effectively in the future.

Organisations and services were supported in different ways, according to the needs they identified:

- to directly use evidence in service delivery
- to involve service users in how services are planned and delivered
- to assess the usefulness of their internal data about service users, and how this capacity can be improved

Some organisations used the About Families reports in their service development without any input from About Families. For example, Parenting across Scotland used the Parenting Teenagers report to revise its resources for parents, and ParentLine Scotland used it to inform training for helpline volunteers.

"The findings will help debate and discussion about the services we provide"

"Having a practice and research base makes complete sense"

"the report …will be useful in informing service change as it contains many areas of research in one single document"

"Lots of new ideas… made me challenge my views"

(Comments from event participants)

"About Families has helped identify key research and put it across in an easy to understand manner. They have been keen to work alongside service users and help them understand often difficult and complex issues and make them feel involved in the delivering change.

(Project evaluation survey respondent)

"The reports have bridged the gap between academic research and practice. They have been really helpful and all the staff in the organisation are aware of them and use them."

(Action planning partner)

What About Families achieved

The project enabled organisations and services which support families to:

- be more aware of the needs of parents and families; both through learning from research, and consulting their own service users,
- be more aware of current research on key parenting topics,
- be better able to develop evidence-based services- using an action-planning approach,
- make better use of existing resources such as research evidence and service level data, and
- include parents and families in the design of service delivery and support them to articulate their needs

What stakeholders told us worked well

Relevant, reliable, accessible evidence

Identifying relevant and reliable evidence: identifying topics in direct response to challenges reported by service users and service delivery meant that evidence sought was relevant and meaningful. Reliable research, independently reviewed, was valued to inform service planning and funding bids, and strengthen services.

Identifying gaps in research: stakeholders viewed the evidence reports as helpful in identifying gaps in the evidence available to inform service development and delivery; in particular, in demonstrating the research gaps relating to families affected by disability.

"We have learned that there is less evidence out there than we originally thought – especially about disabled parents and their families. It's been really helpful in identifying what is there, and where the gaps are."
(Project partner)

Identifying gaps was also valued by academic peer reviewers:

"It helps to identify what the gaps are, which is very important – it points us in the right direction and identifies where further research needs to be done".

Accessible evidence, all in one place: researchers and practitioners valued highly having relevant research evidence in an easily accessible format and consolidating evidence on topic themes in one place. Stakeholders saw synthesising and sharing evidence as a main achievement of About Families.

"The evidence was excellent – having it all organised in one place provides a real value. Also that it's embedded in an action-focused process". (Expert reviewer)

"[About Families] produced robust evidence in easily accessible formats." (Project evaluation survey respondent)

Using different types of knowledge: combining different types of knowledge (from research, services, staff and families) puts service users, practitioners and project partners in the evidence production process, and increases engagement.

Independence: About Families' neutral stance on evidence was recognised and valued.

"It carries more weight if it's independent research."
(Evidence Request Bank user)

About Families' neutral stance was also valued in action planning - as an external partner, About Families played an important role as a 'critical friend'.

Evidence into action

Supporting services by both raising awareness around evidence and its implications for service delivery, and by developing their capacity to utilise evidence to inform thinking and practice, was central to using evidence in service planning and delivery:

Increasing engagement in research: working with stakeholders to reflect on evidence and to use research in practice increased their ability to assess and engage with evidence in considering service design, delivery and evaluation. This process of taking evidence into action can be subtle and takes place over time.

"[staff] capabilities have increased enabling them to assess the findings in research and to help identify key issues that need to be targeted." (Action planning partner)

"[About Families made] organisations think about what the evidence is saying and looking at their services to see if there are gaps in their service provision."
(Action planning partner)

Action planning partners, and in some cases service users, felt academic research was more relevant, accessible and meaningful:

"Research can often be boring, but we broke it down, and they [service users and volunteers] found it really interesting. It helped them to engage with research, see the value in it." Action planning partner)

Project partners stressed that taking evidence into action is not necessarily quick, linear or tangible:

"The evidence to action process is very subtle: it's a creeping influence of knowledge which makes service provision better" (PAS project partner)

Affirming practice and sharing understanding: stakeholders valued accessing evidence that affirmed practice, and it helped them share understanding with wider stakeholders and to validate practice. Being able to translate anecdote and experience into 'knowledge' was seen as an important aspect of the About Families model.

> *"The workers have found it very affirming to have their work confirmed as being on the right track."*
>
> (Action planning partner)
>
> *"It evidences and consolidates what we do. It's helped to develop our business plan, and helped our new Board members understand what we do."*
>
> (Evidence Request Bank user)
>
> *"It's not about doing something new, it's about making better use of what we have and what we know ...and turning it into 'evidence'. Now we have knowledge – much more than anecdote."* (Action planning partner)
>
> *"[the] evidence reports validate practice to policy makers and funders."* (PAS project partner)

Organisations need support to increase capacity: key to progressing action planning work was having a dedicated member of the About Families team working directly with partners and practitioners to guide and support them to develop capacity and capability to use evidence in service planning.

> *"It provides an extra pair of hands – to push things forward."* (Action planning partner)
>
> *"[About Families] worked hard to help us to look at and reflect on our work and future work."*
>
> (Action planning partner)

Service planning and evaluation support: having a clear process for supporting service providers to reflect on evidence, and apply evidence to designing, implementing and evaluating service planning was highly valued.

> *"The 'process' set up by About Families really gave us an insight and a framework for taking forward future pieces of work."* (Action planning partner)
>
> *"Learning from this small scale piece of work (i.e. around timeframes, planning and flexibility) will all inform future work to develop systems and procedures for involving [service users] in future service developments."* (Action planning partner)

Engaging with partners: partnership working facilitated engaging practitioners with evidence, and encouraged links both within and between organisations and across sectors.

> *"[About Families] created a trusting environment in which to explore additional partnership working."*
>
> (Action planning partner)
>
> *"Increasing collaboration between practitioners, academic, managers and policy makers [was a key achievement]."* (Project evaluation survey respondent)

The lessons we learned

Equalities: About Families has identified a gap in addressing the needs of families affected by disability, in both research and practice. Inequitable access to mainstream services has also been highlighted in evidence for other types of families, including lone parents, ethnic minority families, fathers and families with kinship care arrangements.

Quality of service-level data: while some organisations collect data about service users, they can lack the capacity or expertise to use data to inform planning; or collect incomplete or limited data which undermines its usefulness.

Service-led development: many services had little previous experience of involving service users in service planning. Service providers were invariably positive about the principle of involving service users in planning and valued the results, suggesting that this is an untapped and highly useful source of evidence.

> *"Not only did the work provide insight into the needs of [service users] it also demonstrated that it is possible to engage with typically 'hard to reach' groups."*
>
> (Action planning partner)
>
> *"The experience of involving users to inform our work [a non-service delivery agency] has been very beneficial and will be a part of future work with service delivery organisations."* (Action planning partner)

Organisations have limited time and capacity to learn: organisations find it difficult to find the time, and to develop the capacity, to learn and apply an evidence-to-action process without proactive support. About Families found that lack of time was a key barrier to exploring new ways of working. Linking evidence to action developments with organisational objectives, and communicating these to staff and other stakeholders, can help to demonstrate the relevance of this approach.

Keeping evidence in mind: it was sometimes difficult to keep action planning focussed on the evidence base. When using an evidence to action process, it is important to ensure that developments are explicitly designed to use the evidence from the outset, and reflect back to the evidence as plans progress, so that the evidence-base is not lost sight of.

Stakeholder engagement: having experimented with different ways of engaging services with evidence (e.g. participative forum events, sector specific events, single and cross topic events, communities of practice) we have learnt that working more intensively with stakeholders increases engagement and outputs.

Reach: while About Families managed to reach broadly across sectors and target relevant individuals, it is more difficult to reach people who experience barriers to using evidence.

Topic relevance: while the evidence About Families explored has been relevant to a range of partners, catering for broad interests inevitably means less depth on sector-specific issues. During action planning discussions, About Families found that practitioners can find it more challenging to apply general topics to service planning.