



Alliance for
Useful Evidence

Theory of Change

Helen Mthiyane, June 2018

Developing a Theory of Change (ToC) has enabled us to think through and present clearly how our different activities fit together and contribute towards our intended outcomes. Here we describe the key assumptions that sit behind it, and the evidence for our approach.

The Alliance's ultimate goal is that **'decision-makers in government and civil society routinely make appropriate use of high quality evidence to inform strategy, policy and practice.'** Everything we do contributes towards this goal. And it's an ambitious goal, requiring significant behaviour change.

The COM-B system, widely recognised by behavioural scientists, sets out three conditions - capability, opportunity and motivation (COM) - which are essential to behaviour change (B).¹ In order for decision-makers to change their behaviour, they must possess the skills and knowledge to use evidence (capability), have the desire to do so (motivation), and have access to external systems and processes that make evidence use possible (opportunity). We reflect this model in our ToC by grouping activities into three strands, which together lead to the behaviour change we want to effect.



The Alliance is by no means the only agent involved in increasing decision-makers' use of evidence - there are many other individuals and organisations in the same space working towards the same goal. The Alliance's nature as a network, facilitating interactions across the evidence ecosystem, means that we never work alone. In our ToC, we've included the activities which the Alliance usually leads or focuses on, but also those that we contribute to, in partnership or as a collaborative effort, as well as those we don't deliver, but which we endorse and support in more indirect ways. This is to provide a more complete 'theory' of how evidence-use behaviour change is brought about, and the Alliance's role within it.

As you'd expect, we've used evidence to help us develop our approach. Our 2016-2019 [Action Plan](#) was informed by research carried out by UCL's EPPI-Centre in the Alliance-led project [The Science of Using Science](#). The EPPI-Centre's final report,² published in April 2016, summarised the findings from two reviews of evidence on getting research used, (1) a systematic review of reviews of evidence-informed decision-making (EIDM) literature, and (2) a review of the wider social science literature relevant to EIDM. Whilst the study found a need for stronger evidence in many areas, the evidence that there was has shaped our thinking about how we have an impact.

We summarise below how our activities are supported by evidence, with reference to the Science of Using Science project, as well as some key assumptions. If you'd like to read more about the evidence for evidence use, our discussion paper on the project is available to [download from our website](#).

1 Capability to use evidence well

- Our training and resources are designed to equip decision-makers with the skills to look for evidence and judge for themselves its appropriateness and quality. But we always start with why it's important to use evidence. The first review found reliable evidence for the effectiveness of skill-building interventions, so long as they build motivation to use research evidence at the same time.
- We follow adult learning principles when designing capacity building programmes, for example, tailoring them so they are relevant to the reality of participants' work, whether in a pressurised government department or a resource-constrained voluntary organisation. The findings from the second review found that the 'integration of adult learning theories and principles with EIDM capacity-building is likely to enhance the long-term performance of interventions supporting decision-makers' EIDM skills'.³ Our training is interactive and simulation based, which evidence also supports.⁴
- The majority of our programmes are delivered as short, intensive sessions, as getting decision-makers to commit more than a day of their time to training has proven very difficult. However, there is cautious evidence from the first review that 'interventions applied at a low intensity' have no effect.⁵ This means we must ensure that any short-term interventions we offer are part of a longer-term programme of learning.
- We publish resources on our website for anyone to make use of, but ideally they will be used alongside face-to-face interactions. This is because the evidence indicates that passive dissemination is ineffective. Rather than just putting things on our website and hoping that they are found, the more we can actively engage with our audience, the better the chance that they benefit from our resources.

Key assumptions

- Our shorter training courses should be embedded in a more sustained programme of learning within the partners' organisations in order to be most effective.
- Our resources should be used in scenarios where there is opportunity for two-way engagement (passively disseminating is unlikely to make a difference on its own).
- We assume that there is a demand for skills-building training and resources amongst our target audiences and the Alliance is best placed to develop, market and deliver these - or that we use the expertise of others as needed.

2 Opportunity to use evidence in decision-making

- Central to this strand is the provision of easily accessible, high quality and usable evidence. This includes championing the What Works movement and advising and supporting new evidence intermediaries, working with academics to help them present their research in more user-friendly formats, and thought leadership on what makes high quality evidence. The first review found reliable evidence for 'Interventions facilitating access to research evidence, for example through communication strategies and evidence repositories, conditional on the intervention design simultaneously trying to enhance decision-makers' opportunity and motivation to use evidence'.⁶
- Through our network of 3,700+ individuals across the UK and beyond, we have built a community of evidence supporters, including those both on the supply- and demand-side. We bring the network together through events of all sizes, as well as opportunities to become evidence champions and enter into strategic partnerships. The outcome of this is to create a supportive culture around evidence. There is cautious evidence from the first review that 'Unstructured interaction and collaboration between decision-makers and researchers'⁷ tends to be less effective and that clearly defined, light touch approaches to facilitating interaction are better.
- We work with partners across the sector on initiatives which aim to embed evidence-use systems and processes in policy pathways. This includes the transparency framework we developed with the Institute for Government and Sense about Science. The first review found cautious evidence for the effectiveness of this type of activity.⁸
- For evidence to be made use of, it must exist, and we know that in some areas of social policy there are significant gaps. While we don't focus on this activity ourselves, we support the efforts of others to identify and fill evidence gaps.

Key assumptions

- What Works Centres and other evidence intermediaries can be effective at increasing the use of evidence only if they increase the motivation and capability of potential users as well as making evidence available. In advising new centres on their functions, the Alliance can help to increase understanding of this.
- We assume that sufficient evidence will usually exist for each social policy area for it to be presented as an accessible 'evidence base' that can help decision-makers. But gaps in evidence should be identified and prioritised for further research.
- The systems of government and civil society organisations need to change to accommodate and encourage the routine use of evidence by their staff. We assume that with sufficient engagement, motivation and support these institutions will commit to making the necessary changes to policy and processes. Our strategic partnerships with organisations were developed in recognition of the fact that we often need to shift the culture and attitude of a whole organisation towards evidence, not just focus on individuals.
- The Alliance's role as a facilitator of interactions amongst our community is important, and we should be proactive at encouraging communication and collaboration among our network. For example, it is better to have a focus or purpose to an event rather than simply providing unstructured networking opportunities.

3 Motivation to use evidence

- Many of our activities are specifically aimed at motivating decision-makers to use evidence, helping them to see why it is beneficial and worthwhile, and raising awareness of the opportunities for evidence use. *The Science of Using Science* report found an absence of evidence for the effectiveness of interventions that raise awareness of evidence and positive attitudes for evidence use, so this could be an area for us to prioritise for impact measurement.
- Activities such as supporting Evidence Champions within organisations and sponsoring evidence awards aim to normalise evidence use across government and civil society. There is broad support in social science literature for effective methods of awareness raising, including peer recognition and social marketing, to increase visibility of evidence and help it to become the norm. Public commitments from the heads of professional bodies help to embed evidence into ways of working and make it a part of professional conduct.
- As well as sharing positive case studies, and highlighting the advantages of using evidence we also focus on the risks and potential consequences of poor evidence use, and scrutinise the use of evidence by public figures and organisations. Evidence from both the first and second reviews in the *Science of Using Science* report suggests that this is effective. Due to the human bias in favour of avoiding a loss (rather than making a gain), negative examples might have more of an impact than positive ones.
- Many of our activities, such as publishing case studies, aim to build positive attitudes towards EIDM. There is an absence of evidence for the effectiveness of this as most interventions in the literature did not focus on this in isolation - it could, perhaps, be an area we prioritise for our own evaluation. However, the first review found cautious evidence of positive effects of some interaction interventions between decision-makers and researchers.
- One of the Alliance's strengths is in its face-to-face lobbying and influencing ability. The second review found that advocacy and awareness-raising campaigns can be effective, but only if there is opportunity, as well as motivation, to use evidence.

Key assumptions

- Highlighting 'bad practice' can be very effective, but this should be done with sensitivity, so as not to counteract our more positive, motivational activities and building a supportive culture.
- To help depict the different aspects of our work we've presented them as clusters of discrete activities, but in reality there is a lot of overlap. By increasing the capability and opportunity to use evidence, we will indirectly increase motivation.

We are committed to reviewing both the diagram and this narrative regularly, and incorporating/reflecting the relevant evidence-base as it grows. We'd welcome feedback on it, particularly from those with whom we share the goal of increasing the use of evidence in decision-making.

[View our Theory of Change](#)

Endnotes

1. Michie et al., (2011) 'Capability is defined as the individual's psychological and physical capacity to engage in the activity concerned. It includes having the necessary knowledge and skills. Motivation is defined as all those brain processes that energise and direct behaviour, not just goals and conscious decision-making. It includes habitual processes, emotional responding, as well as analytical decision-making. Opportunity is defined as all the factors that lie outside the individual that make the behaviour possible or prompt it' (Michie, S., van Stralen, M. M. and West, R. (2011) The behaviour change wheel: a new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions.' *Implementation Science.* 6(1), 42).
2. Langer, L., Tripney, J. and Gough, D. (2016) 'The Science of Using Science: Researching the Use of Research Evidence in Decision-Making.' London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London.
3. Ibid, page 19.
4. See blog by Jonathan Breckon, January 2016: 'What works in training? Six lessons for developing professionals'. <http://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/what-works-in-training-six-lessons-for-developing-professionals/>
5. P.2 of Langer, L., Tripney, J. and Gough, D. (2016) 'The Science of Using Science: Researching the Use of Research Evidence in Decision-Making.' London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London.
6. Ibid, page 1.
7. Ibid, page 2.
8. Ibid, page 1.

About the Alliance for Useful Evidence

The Alliance for Useful Evidence is a network, hosted by Nesta, that champions the smarter use of evidence in social policy and practice. We do this through advocacy, convening events, sharing ideas and resources, and supporting individuals and organisations through advice and training. We promote our work through our network of more than 3,700 individuals from across government, universities, charities, businesses, and local authorities in the UK and internationally. Anyone can join the Alliance network at no cost.

To sign up please visit: www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/join

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