



Alliance for Useful Evidence

Standards of Evidence: How do we use them? Can we improve them?

On 26 November 2018 the Alliance for Useful Evidence and the Centre for Homelessness Impact brought together providers and users of Standards of Evidence from a range of charitable and government organisations.

The event built on the Alliance for Useful Evidence report [‘Mapping the Standards of Evidence Used in UK social policy’](#) and helped to inform our ongoing work with providers of Standards, with the aim of improving the field for all, and to learn from each others experiences. We discussed four questions, summarised here.

1. What benefits do Standards of Evidence of evidence bring? How do Standards of Evidence help you in your work?

- Majority of standards start with Theory of Change, which encourages organisations to take stock/reflect and not launch into data collection.
- Supports the maturity model > where we are now, where do we need to go next?
- A clear organisational framework to support your own evidence gathering and to assess the quality of other evidence.
- Improves accountability, legitimacy, consistency.
- Enables organisations/practitioners to compare one thing with another, in different contexts.
- Scalability - makes collaboration easier eg different localities.
- Useful as an evaluation tool:
 - Understanding what’s realistic/appropriate for us.
 - Feedback loop into research.
- People like the padlock system - it makes evidence accessible.
- Helps us to make better decisions, including decisions about risk.
- Help to defend against tendency to be persuaded by one or two compelling studies and to assess quality of the many different studies out there.
- Value for money.
- Helps to have conversations with organisations about why it’s important to prove that what you’re doing works.
- Sets expectations and raises standards.
- Increases comparability of different interventions.
- Standards are useful to hold people to account: how are you doing this? Makes us more credible.
- Helps to give insight - what evidence is there of the quality of work done by fundees?
- Helps people to be critical consumers of evidence.

- Counteracts the 'Daily Mail effect' perpetuating poor quality evidence.
- Gets people thinking about what works for different populations.
- Quality and rigour - transparency about what you know and what you don't know.
- Provides a shorthand and a common language: allowing conversations in a common language - achieving a buy-in approach. Creates a neutral way of talking across funders, projects, evaluators, governments. RCTs are no longer a dirty word - we can talk about methodologies.

2. Do you encounter barriers or risks when using Standards of Evidence?

- RCTs are part of many SoE but these can be unrealistic for many organisations.
- Evidence standards are most relevant and useful for looking at bodies of knowledge, not individual organisations or interventions.
- More clarity is needed about when evidence standards are applicable and what they do and don't do. Most standards are about an assessment of impact.
- More guidance needed about what is 'good enough' evidence to make the decisions you need to make? What level of evidence do you need?
- Working in fragile states - context is important. Might be unrealistic that you can ever reach a level 3 in your context.
- For some, a perception of standards as a 'stick to beat us with'.
- Can be frustrating when there is not very much quality empirical evidence available.
- Danger that SoE are being misused on the front line.
- Lack of skills in funded organisations to apply them. Practitioners need to know how to implement, this is often missing.
- Don't want organisations to narrow down as they're only able to RCT of a tiny bit of a large programme.
- A lot of interest in case studies and how they fit into the body of evidence. Need to frame what a case study is and what it's for. Describe as a practice example rather than 'good example'.
- Who approves them? Need for consistency. Are the organisations which validate interventions then at risk of being blamed if intervention not successful?
- Organisations achieving standards can overclaim what this means.
- Need for detail/complexity as well as the simple summary sheet - make it too simple and quality suffers. Confusing desire for simplicity with oversimplifying.
- Standards of Evidence can become a hierarchy where everyone is desperate to get to the top.
- Risk of having standards misapplied because they don't quite fit.
- People go standards shopping - and then governments get confused and start ignoring it.
- Some methods don't fit, require longer-term evidence. Standards exacerbate the gaps in valuing different types of evidence.

3. What support or resources would you find useful when navigating and using them?

- Navigating the existing Standards of Evidence and what each of them are for.
- Clarity on what standards do and don't do. When are standards applicable? When are they not applicable? Clarity on the differences between standards.

- Support on how to implement (and what is realistic). Something that situates SoE in the decision-making process but what that might look and feel like within different agencies, institutions etc.
- 'How to' guidance:
 - Case studies
 - Practice examples
 - Qualitative research standard
- Improve levels of confidence and support for users.
- More information on appropriate research design: one level is not better than the other.
- Mapping 'practice' approaches.

4. What should we do next? How could A4UE (and others) help to make Standards of Evidence more useful and useable?

- Discourage more new standards. Look at which existing standards can be merged.
- Identify some of the visual models that we can use in place of the linear/numerical hierarchy of evidence? Eg a decision-tree?
- Marketing of the benefits of good quality evidence. Make standards accessible to all.
- Encourage good use of quasi-experiments.
- Explicit statement of appropriateness of Standards of Evidence.
- Use Standards of Evidence as means of building people's capability to understand what evidence is. Think about how it can be rolled into organisational development/incorporated into a larger learning development offer/plan.
- Look at similarities and groupings of standards rather than aim to have one standard. Some standards are mainly about causality, but you might need standards around implementation. If you try to integrate many purposes, you end up with something complex rather than simple.
- Distinguish between trustworthiness and relevance - can't cover both!
- Increase user engagement for the usability.
- Training for social researchers. Why does some evidence from some contexts dominate?
- More work on replications and scalability.
- Standards need to capture:
 - Context
 - Reach
 - Implementation
 - Different research questions.
 - Cost effectiveness not just effectiveness..
- Investigate how SoE are changing practice.