Q&A WITH DR SHIRLEY WOODS-GALLAGHER, MANCHESTER CITY COUNCIL

Why is evaluation of arts and cultural activities important?

Evaluating arts and cultural programmes is not just something you do to help you draw down funding. You should use evaluation to help your organisation develop and re-shape its offer. The process of evaluating helps you reflect on yourself and ensure that what you do is both effective and in keeping with your organisational mission.

What sort of data is useful for commissioners?

They will be interested in both quantitative and qualitative data.

Some of the main types of quantitative data they will want includes the number of people who:

- You reached out to
- Were referred to your project
- Were accepted onto your project
- Stayed with the project to the end
- Experienced change as a result of being involved in the project (see answer below on showing that your work makes a difference).

On the qualitative side, commissioners will be interested in the views of all those involved, such as:

- What did those who took part in or experienced the project think of it?
- What did the people who delivered the project think of it? What aspects went well? What could have been improved?
- What did the commissioner think of it?

How can arts and cultural organisations show that their work makes a difference?

One of the simplest ways is to ask those involved in your work about the change they experience. You can do this by asking them about their observations of where they were at the beginning and end of an intervention – and maybe at stages in between too.

There are light touch tools to help with this, such as the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) which shows impact on low level mental health conditions. Because WMWBS has been used so extensively, commissioners tend to have confidence in it as a measurement tool.
How can arts and cultural organisations show value for money?

As well as knowing your unit costs (see ‘Top Tips’ below), think of your work in these terms: for the money spent on your activity, what is the added value for the people involved. If you can identify any data to show this, it’s easier for you to demonstrate your contribution to strategies relating to your locality.

What practical tips do you have to help arts and cultural organisations collect evaluation data, given limited capacity?

Here are my top tips:

- Consider what you are trying to find out or evidence. This question is key. Once you have identified this, it becomes a little easier to develop your evaluation plan.
- Only collect data that is actually collectable. Be realistic about what you can collect within your resources – don’t try to collect everything. And don’t try to measure things that you’re not in a position to measure.
- Work out your unit costs and use these to make your case. A simple way of doing this is calculating the cost per head of a project or piece of work.
- Make your data collection process simple: if staff and others who collect the data can’t do it well then the data may be flawed. Making sure that those who collect it understand why it’s being collected is also important to ensuring that it is collected well.
- Be clear on how often you want to collect data and who is going to analyse it. Thinking these issues through in advance will help your plans to be realistic and achievable.
- Use annual reports or summary reports to communicate your organisation to others. Producing data in these formats can help to give you a structure to work to, and helps you track trends over time.

Sometimes commissioners and funders ask for detailed demographic data. How can we get this from people who may be vulnerable, without alienating them?

It can be tricky. You could ensure that you collect data anonymously, and reassure those who supply it that it is anonymous. That way, you can still analyse and use in your evaluation.

How concerned are commissioners about drop-out rates amongst participants?

In public services, the drop-out rates can vary significantly. To give an indication, if you have a drop-out rate of 90%, that’s worrying. If the drop-out rate is more like 30%, then that can be acceptable. It’s important that you say what your strategy is to engage people, and how you will work to minimise any drop-outs.

How can you measure the number of people into employment, when those you are working with may be some way off achieving this goal?

Try to baseline where a person is up to at the start of your intervention, and then assess the journey they travel as a result (see answer above on showing that your work makes a difference). The pace of change will be different for different people, and many commissioners will understand this.

Other useful links:
Using WEMWBS to measure the impact of your work on mental wellbeing: a practice-based user guide