Toolkit
Overview

Who is the toolkit for?

Foundations and other organisations that fund or directly commission research to inform their work increasingly need to make the knowledge and evidence produced work hard to get maximum value from it. If you fund or commission sector-specific research to inform your grant-making, you are probably aware that it takes a great deal of time and resources to turn even the smallest pieces of research and evidence gathering into changes in policy and practice.

This toolkit has been designed primarily with Trusts and Foundations in mind but may be useful to other third sector organisations that use, fund or commission research to support their work. The aim of this guidance is to help you get the most value and impact from your investment in research and resulting grant-making by helping you think through the process of planning, governing and disseminating a research project.

Structure of the toolkit

The toolkit contains worksheets to guide you through each of the key stages in the research/ project process:

Stage 1

Defining the problem

This stage of the toolkit is designed to guide you through the process of defining the problem and existing evidence; mapping out the changes you would like to happen as a result of your research project and clearly defining your research questions.

Stage 2

Planning and governing your research project

This stage is intended to provide considerations and helpful hints to help you develop and govern your research project, rather than be a comprehensive guide to the commissioning process. Here we include tips on developing a good research brief, choosing your researcher and convening a research steering or advisory group.

Stage 3

Engaging your audience(s)

This stage will help you think through the process of working with your target audience(s), ie the intended users of your research knowledge and evidence. The key purpose of this stage is to ensure that your audience(s) is (are) receptive to the research and more likely and able to use it.

Stage 4

Translating your research knowledge and evidence

This stage is intended to guide you through the processes needed to effectively translate and transfer the research knowledge to your target audience(s) to ensure maximum impact.

Stage 5

Evaluating impact and further gaps in knowledge

This stage is intended to signpost the existing tools available that will help you to review and measure the progress, outcomes and impact of your research project and identify further gaps in your knowledge base.

While reviewing and evaluating your progress and outcomes is often thought of as the final stage in the process (and appears as the final stage in the toolkit), it is important to stress here that this does not necessarily reflect the order of research/project process and planning, for evaluation should not be left until the end of the project.

Each of the five stages is structured in the following way:

- Key steps
- Theory
- Things to consider
- Helpful hints and possible pitfalls
- Exercise and/or framework
- Checklist of actions to be taken

Supporting evidence from the NRF/University of Bristol project

Unless otherwise stated, the guidance in this toolkit is based on the findings from an innovative knowledge transfer partnership (KTP) project between Northern Rock Foundation and the University of Bristol *'Adding Value to Grant-making: the Northern Rock Foundation's research/project approach'*, which set out to assess how using a 'research/project' approach – commissioning evidence to inform effective grant-making – could increase the impact of the Foundation's programmes.

As part of its 'funder-plus' approach, the Northern Rock Foundation's research/project approach combines grant-making with sector-specific research to fill important knowledge gaps, demonstrate what works, and share important learning to inform and influence evidence-based project development, policy and practice.

Increasing reach and impact through the research/project approach

The NRF/University of Bristol project highlighted a set of conditions or **'routes to impact'** that, when combined, have the potential to create the maximum influence on the extent to which the research and associated projects impact on policy, practice and other projects. The toolkit has been developed to incorporate the 'routes to impact' depending on where they occur within the research/project cycle. The steps have been designed to try and help simplify what is, in the real world, a complex and non-linear process.

Facilitating reach and impact through the research/project approach

Creating the widest possible reach and impact from research knowledge and evidence is an ongoing process that requires active facilitation. The NRF/University of Bristol project found that the role of 'facilitator' does not necessarily lay with either those who *produce* or those who *use* the research. For the purposes of developing this toolkit, the knowledge, experience and skills required of the facilitator were based on those of the Northern Rock Foundation's grant programme manager. In other organisations the role of this 'facilitator of impact' may fall within the remit of the research project manager or another responsible officer, or may be shared between the funding organisation and the research provider.

Systematic pre-planning and **effective knowledge translation** (ie the steps between the creation of new knowledge and its application to yield beneficial outcomes for society) are **key** to getting the most from your research project. Knowledge translation is not merely about promoting solutions to the sector but translating the research findings, knowledge or evidence objectively to help the sector take ownership and develop their own solutions.

We hope that this toolkit will show you how, by situating knowledge translation processes at the heart of your research project approach, you can maximise its impact and help improve the effectiveness of your investment in research to support your work in the third sector.