



AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO EVIDENCE FOR THOSE WORKING TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

DARTINGTON SERVICE DESIGN LAB'S STRATEGY

February 2022

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Illustrations by Supreetha Krishnan and design by Rachel Lily

Suggested citation: Dartington Service Design Lab (2022). *An integrated approach to evidence for those working to improve outcomes for children and young people. Dartington Service Design Lab's Strategy.*


ABOUT DARTINGTON SERVICE DESIGN LAB

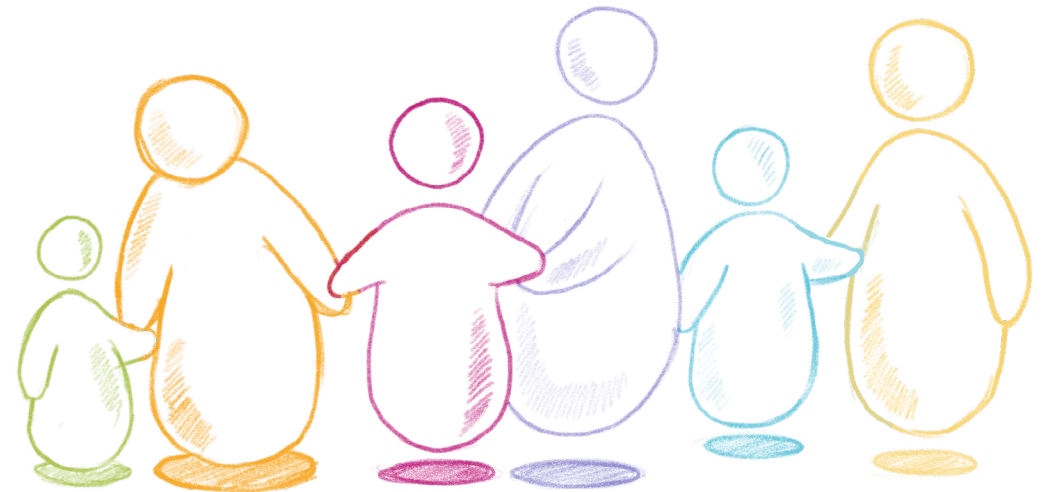
Dartington Service Design Lab is a research and design charity focussed on using evidence and design in innovative ways to help those working with children and young people have a greater impact. Our team of researchers and designers are skilled in service design and improvement methods, systems thinking approaches, data visualisation and communications. As an organisation, we have more than 50 years of experience working across the public and voluntary sectors.

 dartington.org.uk

 info@dartington.org.uk

 [@DartingtonSDL](https://twitter.com/DartingtonSDL)

 [@servicedesignlab](https://www.instagram.com/servicedesignlab)



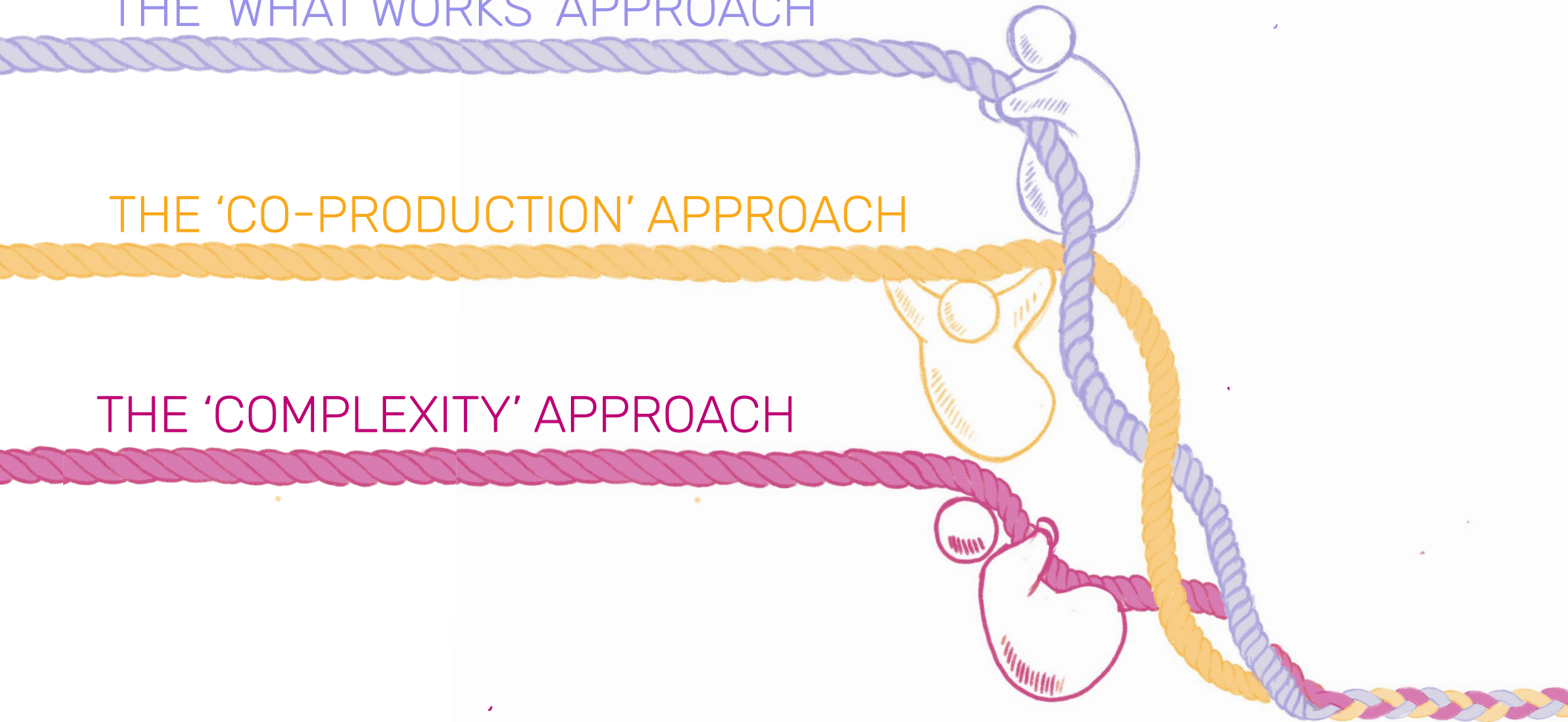
INTRODUCTION

In this paper we describe an 'integrated' approach to the generation and use of evidence which combines elements from three different schools of thought. As a shorthand, we've called them:

THE 'WHAT WORKS' APPROACH

THE 'CO-PRODUCTION' APPROACH

THE 'COMPLEXITY' APPROACH



Over the last five years we have been inspired by, and used methods, from all three approaches. This experience convinces us that they are each inherently valuable and are most valuable when they are integrated and used alongside each other, rather than being treated as mutually exclusive.

When different forms of evidence can 'speak' to each other, we can build stronger, more useful knowledge on which we can act.

We outline the three schools of thought and their strengths and weaknesses, before describing what it could look like to integrate all three.

We go on to describe our role, and that of others, in bringing about a sector-wide change to this more integrated approach to the generation and use of evidence. Implementing the role we describe is at the heart of Dartington Service Design Lab's strategy over the next five years.

We hope this paper will encourage others – funders, delivery organisations, and researchers – to think about their role in how evidence is generated and used, and the changes they would like to see.



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY EVIDENCE?

At Dartington Service Design Lab, we think about evidence as data or information – ideally from multiple sources – that is synthesised and critically appraised to inform better decision-making. This includes information from research, practitioner wisdom and the experience and insights of young people and families. Decision-makers may include government, funders, local commissioners, service delivery organisations, individual practitioners, as well as children and families themselves.

Evidence is shaped by the motivations behind its generation. That is to say, if the questions being asked are ‘what works in tackling a particular problem?’ or ‘does this initiative work in achieving its outcomes?’ then this informs the choice of research methods, leading to particular data being collected and analysed, and to particular answers. Questions related to ‘what works’ have become quite dominant in services for children and young people over the last decade – and they are close to our heart as an organisation.

However, there are other questions we can ask, and answer, that are just as important. These include ‘what matters to families and communities?’, ‘what are the causes or contributors to a particular problem?’, ‘who is unintentionally excluded from this initiative?’ and ‘how do people feel about existing efforts to help?’. Indeed, addressing these questions can help us to ask the ‘does this work?’ question at the right time, and under the right circumstances.

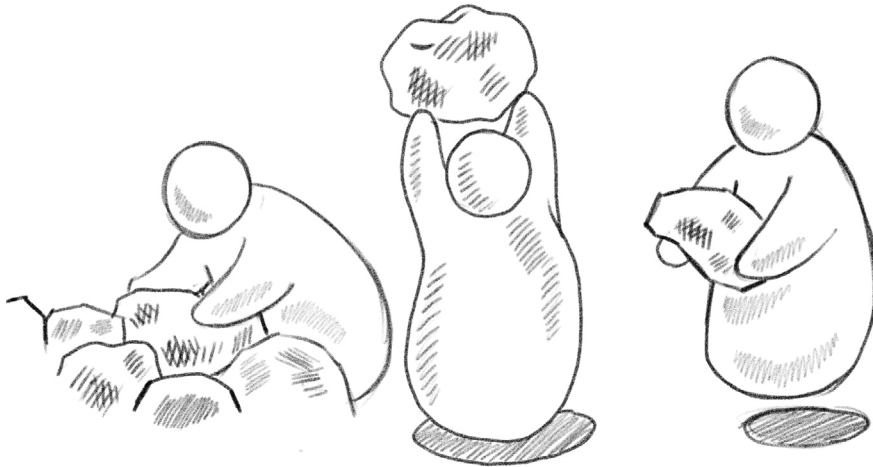
Whatever the question being asked, definitions of what constitutes ‘good enough’ evidence depends upon the context – how significant is the decision that the evidence is being used to inform? Although it doesn’t always happen this way, it’s fair to say that the greater the impact the decision will have, the more ‘robust’ the evidence should be.



Notions of what 'robust' evidence is also change over time.

This can be described as an evolution, given that it tends to happen gradually. We believe this happens in three main ways:

- Firstly, *evidence builds up* to establish a case i.e., knowledge accumulates to create a firm base, or convincingly challenges an existing base.
- Secondly, the *nature* of what is accepted as evidence changes over time – for example what sources of information are valued, and the use of new methods and technologies to collect and analyse information.
- Thirdly, there are developments in the *uses to which evidence is put*, including how it is disseminated and communicated and for what end.



Over the decades, Dartington Service Design Lab – alongside many others – has contributed to the development of evidence around services and outcomes for children. We supported the development of Standards of Evidence in the UK and were early adopters of Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) to evaluate services for children, young people and families. We ensured evidence informed a range of ambitious investments in the public sector and by trusts and foundations.

In the last ten years we observed – and experienced – limitations to this approach (described below). To address these, we began to explore other approaches: to make users' voices and experiences more central to the design and evaluation of services, and to pay more attention to wider contextual influences on outcomes and services, considering complexity and employing 'systems thinking' methods.

We learnt from the fields of improvement and implementation science, informing the development of our own approaches to rapid-cycle design and testing. Over the last year we have also looked explicitly at the ways in which evidence generation and use can both tackle inequalities in society *and* reinforce discrimination and racism. You can [read more about our thoughts and action on this here](#).

THE 'WHAT WORKS' APPROACH

This approach seeks to find out 'what works' in improving outcomes for children and young people.

What Works Centres are most closely associated with this approach and have typically prioritised supporting organisations to take their programmes 'up' the Standards of Evidence and ultimately engage in RCTs. However, the 'What Works' approach has also influenced the practice of many funders, commissioners and delivery organisations beyond What Works Centres themselves, with much activity designed to generate evidence that a certain programme or initiative 'works'.



THE 'WHAT WORKS' APPROACH

This approach has had many benefits:

- In policy, commissioning and practice, there is now a greater focus on outcomes and impact.
- We know more than ever about what conditions and types of policy or practice may be more likely to create a positive (or negative) impact.
- Through investment in evaluation we are beginning to learn more about mechanisms of change.
- We have advanced our approaches to measurement and methods for exploring what works, for whom and in what context.
- There is greater awareness that evidence of effectiveness can be of varying quality, and users of evidence are generally better equipped to scrutinise claims and judge their strength.

But there have also been downsides:

- An emphasis on *proving* rather than *improving* has developed: a rush to generate evidence which proves (or often doesn't prove) impact has often been at the expense of design and implementation which can respond to learning and improve practice over time.
- There has been a drive to package up 'evidence-based practice or programmes'. These resources can be insufficiently clear about the important mechanisms of change or 'active

ingredients', and therefore lack guidance on how to flex for different, or changed, contexts.

- There has been a narrow focus on the impact of activities on outcomes in isolation, which diverts attention from both the systemic and contextual influences which can affect outcomes, and the wider, unintended, impact of activities.
- There has been an emphasis on aggregated estimations of impact, which can hide differential impacts and indirectly contribute to inequalities and discrimination.
- A focus on experimental and quasi-experimental methods may inadvertently devalue insights from case studies, ethnographic approaches and qualitative methodologies, leading to a limited view of what constitutes robust evidence.
- Stemming from all of the above, we see an unfolding 'replication crisis': evidence-informed services often struggle to replicate their impact (in subsequent evaluations, and presumably more generally in practice).

This approach has perhaps also shrunk the everyday understanding of evidence in the sector to be methods that answer one particular question, 'does it work?', meaning, 'can a service be proven to lead to the outcomes that it claims'. As we argue above, evidence needs to be understood as posing, and answering many questions.

THE 'CO-PRODUCTION' APPROACH

This approach can be summarised as prioritising the insights, views and experiences of children, families, communities and practitioners in the design of services.

This approach has many variations and nuances with different origins (co-design, co-production, user- or human-centred design, etc). All tend to reject the notion that effective practice may be parachuted in to new contexts, and rest on the belief that communities, practitioners, managers and organisations must be involved, by right, in the design of services that affect them. Such co-produced or user-centred design approaches typically draw on rights-based approaches and participatory research.



THE 'CO-PRODUCTION' APPROACH

Again, there are many benefits to this approach:

- It reduces the chance of 'top-down' service design and delivery, uninformed by the experiences of those using them, which can exacerbate inequality.
- It increases the likelihood that people will engage with and use the services (increasing the opportunity for a positive impact), as they are more likely to reflect their needs and preferences.
- Co-production can build capacity, knowledge and resources within communities, as opposed to more traditional approaches that may be extractive.
- It can enhance the understanding why services were effective or ineffective, and to show what other factors contributed to outcomes, or the lack of them.
- On-going user-involvement and feedback can illuminate pathways for action and improvement which is tailored to the specific context.

But there can also be downsides in practice:

- Too sharp a focus on the specificity of a particular context can lead to a failure to engage on, or even intentionally overlook, evidence from other times and places. It may neglect existing evidence or insights around what has or hasn't worked well in similar contexts in the past.

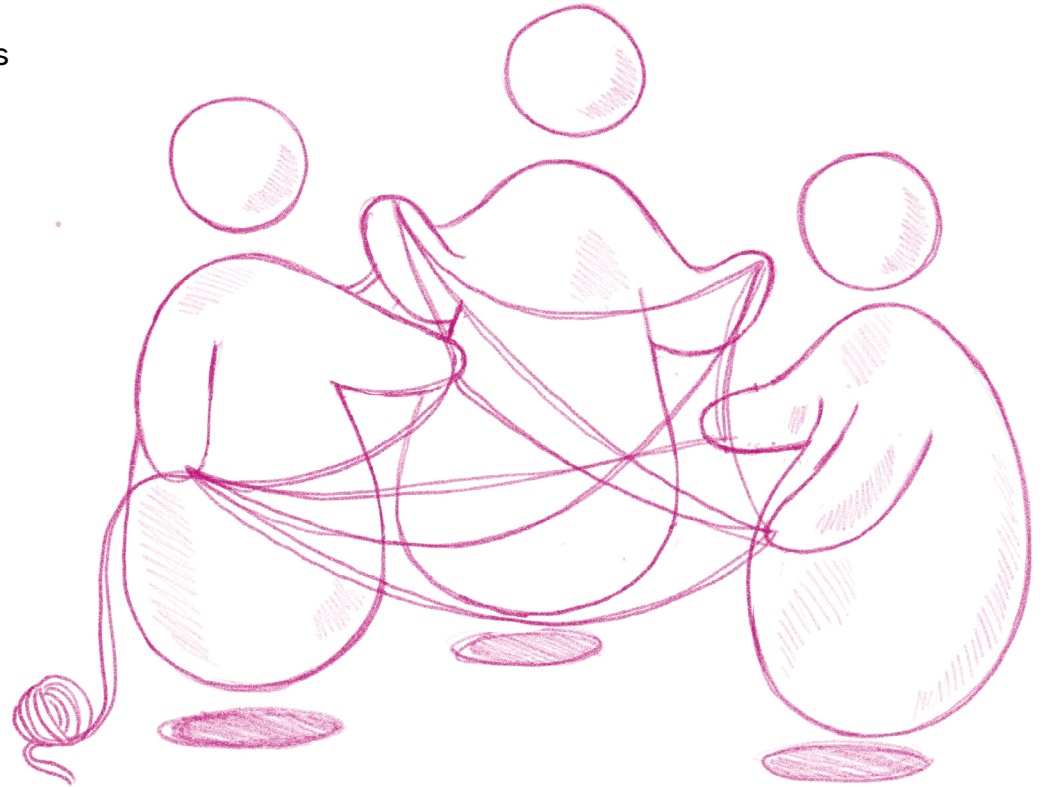
- Conversely, the contextualised evidence generated through this approach may seem too specific to be generalised from and shared, even when others could benefit.
- The experiences and views of any community or group are heterogeneous: one cannot assume that people from one group or context are alike. Discernment, judgment, and prioritisation are still required to understand how to act on what people share – how this is done is not always transparent or explicit.
- The co-production approach is often used to share power more equally between those funding, delivering, experiencing and evaluating services. However, this is challenging, and requires both commitment and patience from commissioners and researchers, which is often hard to realise. In addition, power dynamics and inequalities exist within and between communities, and this can, at times, add friction.

Unlike the 'what works' approach, the co-production approach primarily advances the question 'is this fit for the context?' – which includes whether an initiative is based on the needs and desires of those who will use it, whether it can be implemented, and whether it is used and valued. These are questions that the 'what works' approach can overlook (although they are foundational to achieving impact), but again they are not the only important questions.

THE COMPLEXITY APPROACH

A third approach – gaining greater traction in recent years – is complexity-informed.

This approach considers the wider systemic influences upon outcomes, how these influences interact over time, and how services and activities are influenced and adapt as part of a wider system response.



THE COMPLEXITY APPROACH

Like the other approaches, there are benefits to this:

- It acknowledges the inherent complexity of influences on children's development, and wards against overly narrow or simplistic responses.
- It can surface important local variations and contextual nuances that may have a bearing on services, activities and impact.
- It can help policy-makers, commissioners and practitioners consider intended, as well as unintended consequences of their work.
- It can support coordinated and reciprocal efforts across artificially constructed boundaries, such as health and social care.

Of course, there are downsides or limitations too:

- A complexity perspective is, unsurprisingly, complex! Trying to understand multiple influences, their effects, where to work, and what to measure, can be overwhelming and lead to 'analysis paralysis'.
- An exploration of complexity and local nuance may lead to the conclusion that evidence or learning from one context is never or rarely generalisable to another context. This may lead to a constant reinvention of the wheel, repetition of harmful mistakes or a waste of learning from elsewhere.
- Attempts to understand 'the whole' may detract from efforts to understand and improve 'the parts'. Services and other entities within a system affect people's lives and efforts to improve these effects should not be neglected in favour of focussing only on the bigger picture.

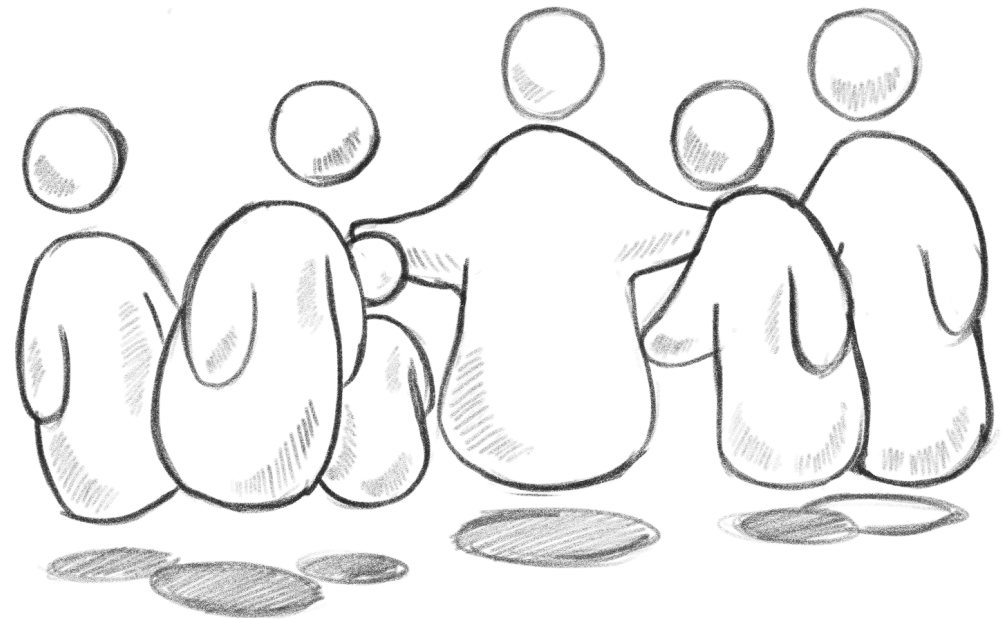
A complexity-informed approach takes us beyond narrow questions of 'what works' and the 'needs and wants' of people, to consider the wider context and interactions in which services for children and families are situated. Too often these are ignored. Yet looking at the 'whole' does not mean we should ignore the constituent parts.

FALSE DIVIDES

We believe that each of these approaches can advance understanding through their alignment with different types of questions. We know that each approach is being used in a variety of ways to support decision-making, and that techniques from each are being used in tandem – fittingly, the benefits of each approach address some of the downsides of the others.

But it also seems apparent to us that the choice of which approach is used is not always based on the question that needs to be answered. Rather, they sometimes seem to be chosen on an ideological basis: an organisation is either interested in ‘what works’ or how people experience things or a rejection of reductionism. We note that government, Research Councils, and What Works Centres are more likely to prioritise the ‘what works’ approach, with grant-making trusts and foundations more likely to take a ‘co-production’ or occasionally a ‘complexity’ approach.

One result of this is that organisations may not consider methods and approaches that could be most appropriate and helpful for them and those they serve. Another downside is that because of the false divide between the three approaches, the evidence or insight created under each does not often ‘talk’ to each other. As a sector, we are missing out on evidence because we cannot reconcile these three approaches into one which meets more needs.



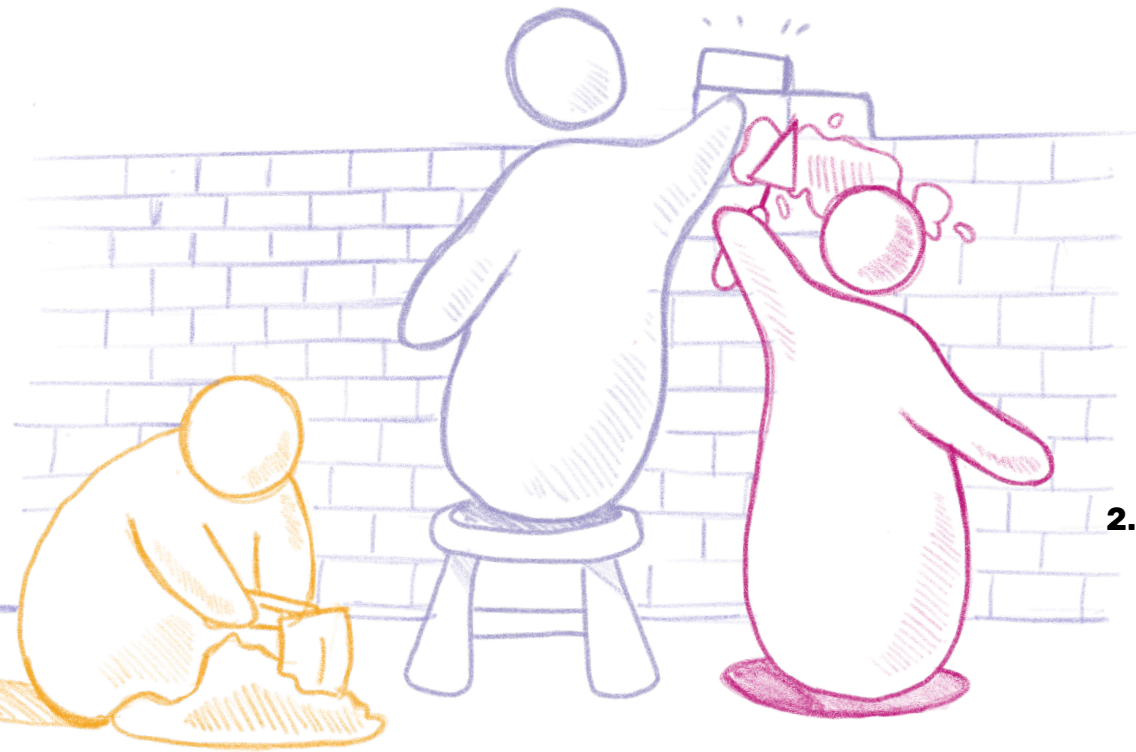
WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

Through our work with charities, local authorities, funders and commissioners we have been exploring what an integrated and reciprocal approach to the generation and use of evidence may look like. We think that evidence should play an important role in the design, commissioning, delivery and evolution of effective and equitable services and systems for children and families – and we think an approach that brings the best of ‘what works’, ‘co-production’ and ‘complexity-informed’ approaches can be most impactful.



OUR VISION FOR EVIDENCE GENERATION AND USE

In this section, we describe our vision of a future integrated approach that builds on the best of current work, and creates bridges between the approaches.



1. We create and strengthen evidential foundations to inform policy and practice

- New generalisable research is strategically commissioned to fill gaps in our collective knowledge about *mechanisms of change*, rather than being generated in a piecemeal way that seeks to prove the impact of specific interventions or commissioning arrangements.
- When designing policy and practice, decision-makers draw on existing knowledge from scientific research, practice experience and user knowledge, and share openly what they have used and why.
- Foundational bodies of evidence are freely and easily accessible for all, intuitive to use and are designed to practically inform decision-making.

2. We generate and use evidence to promote equity

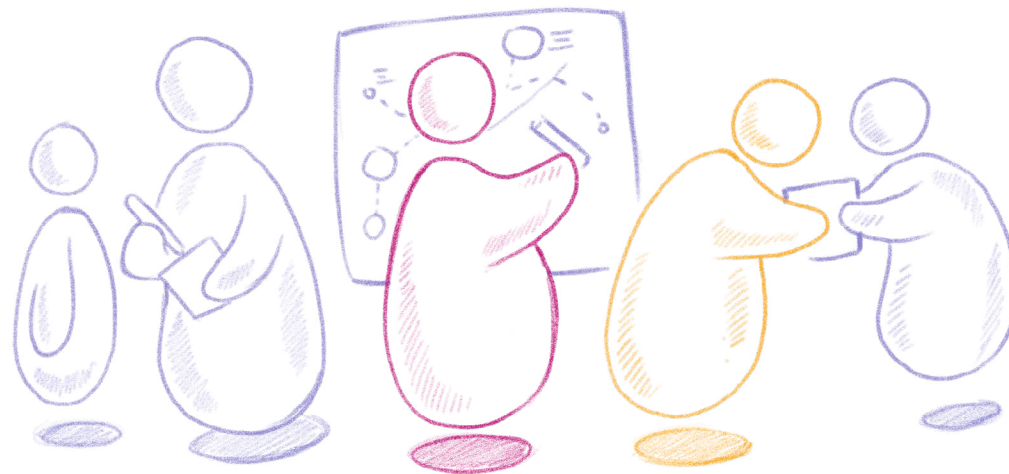
- Evidence intentionally explores and shines a light on inequalities by seeking to identify and understand them, and by testing proposed responses in an equitable way.
- The potential of evidence generation and use to reinforce or even exacerbate discrimination and inequity is recognised, and explicitly tackled, by researchers, and commissioners.

3. We ensure evidence is generated from diverse sources, and is accessible to diverse audiences

- We do not assume existing evidence can be applied 'as is' to different contexts or audiences, we are equipped to critically appraise its relevance, and can draw on knowledge mobilisation methods to support the translation of evidence to new contexts.
- We draw on and balance multiple perspectives and sources of information: prior bodies of research knowledge, data and learning generated through delivery, *in balance with* practice wisdom and local/community experiences, and the views and experiences of those using services or systems¹.

4. We generate and use evidence that contributes to understanding system influences, interactions and systems change

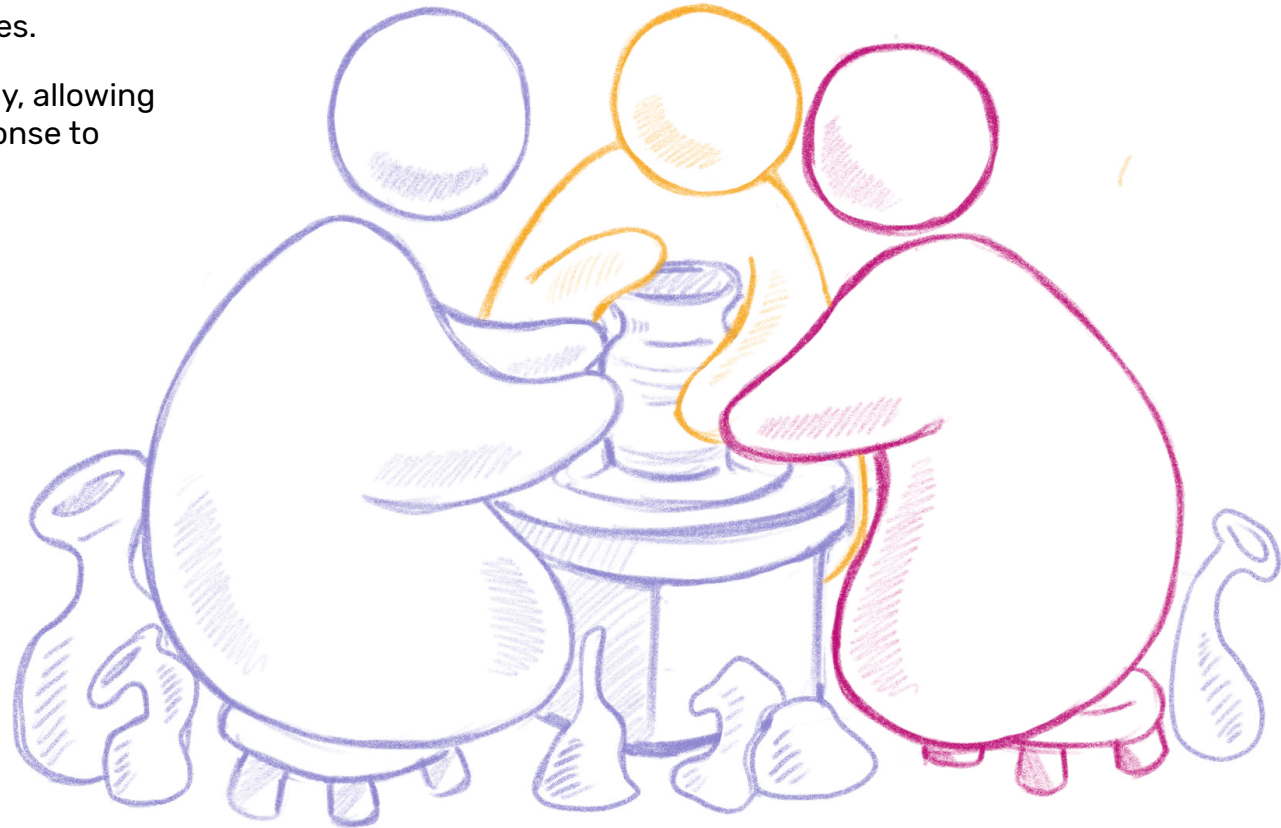
- Evidence and evaluation activities look through a 'wide-angle' lens, recognising the wider system context. We explore the inter-dependencies, influences and dynamics at play within those wider systems.
- We seek to understand the *contribution* that activities make towards outcomes within a specific context, appreciating that activities may have more or less influence over some outcomes than others.



¹ The value of this balance is well described [here](#) by Research in Practice.

5. Evidence is intentionally generated to inform ongoing learning and improvement

- Co-designed and ongoing improvement efforts are informed by existing evidential foundations, both practitioner- and user- experience, and are an integral part of service delivery activities.
- Evidence generated in this way is timely, allowing fast adaptation and innovation in response to rapidly changing contexts.
- Commissioners and funders support and incentivise learning and improvement, rather than narrowly focussing on impact evaluation, or reporting on outputs.



WHO CAN MAKE THE CHANGE?

The integrated approach we have described is certainly visible in pieces of work across the UK and internationally. It brings forward some features of the 'what works', 'co-production' and 'complexity' approaches. But making it more widespread requires a change in mindset to embrace new questions, new methods for developing insights and of course, an appetite to act on learning.



We believe many different types of organisations need to be a part of this change – national and local commissioners and policymakers, funders, delivery organisations large and small, What Works Centres, and evaluators and academics. These organisations are part of the same system and are inter-related: what one does is shaped by, and goes on to shape, the actions of others. Each has a role in moving children's and young people's systems and services to a new way of generating and using evidence.

Research Councils and What Works Centres play a crucial role in building and strengthening strong evidential foundations for sectors. They can do more to guide contextual, system-aware applications of this evidence, and support early stage evidence-informed development and refinement of services before embarking on trials.

Policymakers, commissioners, regulatory bodies and funders of all types should generate and use evidence to understand unequal effects and outcomes, and incentivise exploring approaches to reduce inequality, and further research into whether these are successful.


Drawing on more diverse sources of evidence requires almost all **actors in the evidence ecosystem** to look beyond those with whom they usually work and consider

whether they are hearing from and integrating evidence from research, practitioners and communities into new initiatives. Gradual progress on this will result in a much richer tapestry of perspectives and better informed decisions.

Policymakers and funders can adopt and support a 'wide-angle' systems lens. This requires them, and those who deliver services, to look beyond siloed spheres of action, influence, and attribution. By focusing on contribution, and by centring those with lived experience and practice wisdom, the evidence that is produced can be more meaningful to those most impacted by decisions. By focusing on system dynamics, policymakers and funders can learn where in the system they can intervene to have the greatest impact.

By increasing our attention to learning, translation and mobilisation of evidence, we can ensure that the evidence generated does more than sit on a shelf.

The shift to prioritising, incentivising, and rewarding learning and improvement is, we believe, underway for some grant-making trusts, as well as in many public systems. But there is much more to do here from funders, researchers and delivery organisations themselves.



We ask you to think about your organisation and the role you could play in this new integrated approach. As a first step, we invite you to consider which of the three approaches described in this paper is most aligned – and which elements of the other you could consider integrating into your work, and how.

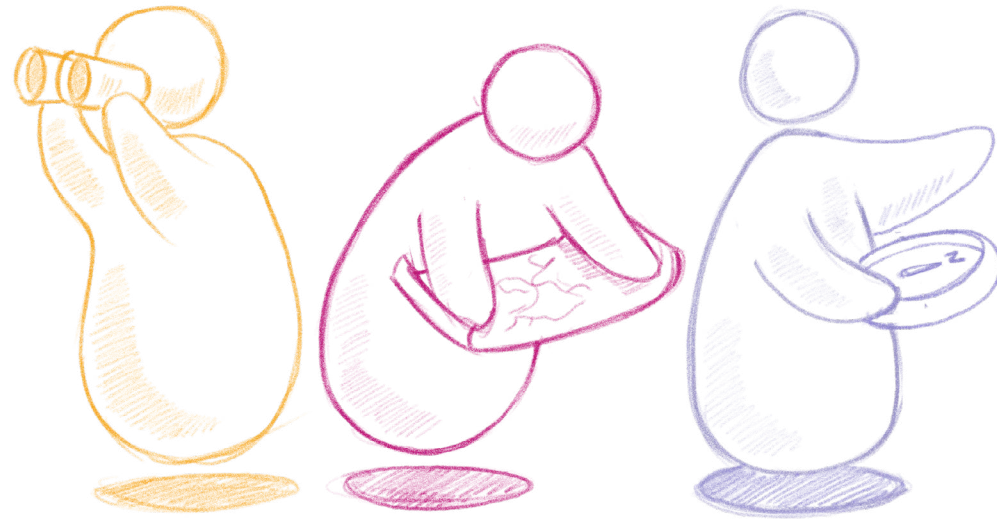
DARTINGTON SERVICE DESIGN LAB'S ROLE

Dartington Service Design Lab is also a part of the evidence ecosystem, and we have thought about what role we may play in this integrated approach to evidence generation and use. We've been inspired by the example of others, and our own experiences have increased our confidence in its value.

Across all these activities, we will actively seek to bridge the gap between the three existing approaches as we build the new integrated one: showing how the evidence generated under each can "talk" to other evidence and be mobilised in the pursuit of better outcomes. We will continue to use methods from each approach, support others to do so, and share our learning about the effects of this. While we move towards the integrated approach outlined above, we will act as an intermediary between the currently siloed approaches and show how they can be integrated.

Based on this experience, Dartington Service Design Lab's strategy commits us to:

- Develop nimble, systemic, contextualised and equitable approaches to evidence generation and use
- Partner with delivery organisations, funders and others to test these approaches and their effects for practitioners, children and young people
 - Share what we learn so others can adopt successful approaches



We will undertake four broad types of activities:

1. Innovations in evidence:

Through discrete projects and activities we will explore, apply and test a range of nascent methods to advance nimble, systemic and contextualised approaches to evidence generation and use. This will include:

- **Tighter integration of design and research**, continuing to take an interdisciplinary approach that embeds design approaches into social research, and vice versa.
- **Rapid-cycle design and testing** approaches to help delivery organisations learn and iteratively improve their impact.
- **Systemic methods** and approaches to inform decision-making in contexts of uncertainty and complexity. This includes development of **systemic theories of change** and application of participatory **system dynamic modelling** to explore assumptions and prototype strategies and activities.

2. Evidence in action:

In committed and long-term partnerships we will bring together multi-disciplinary teams to improve child outcomes. These initiatives will be embedded within geographical places or across thematic areas (such as the early years or adolescent mental health). In these ambitious endeavours we will commit for the long-term, to bring about sustained change, either as a core partner or by taking a Learning Partner role to provide leadership in the generation and use of evidence.



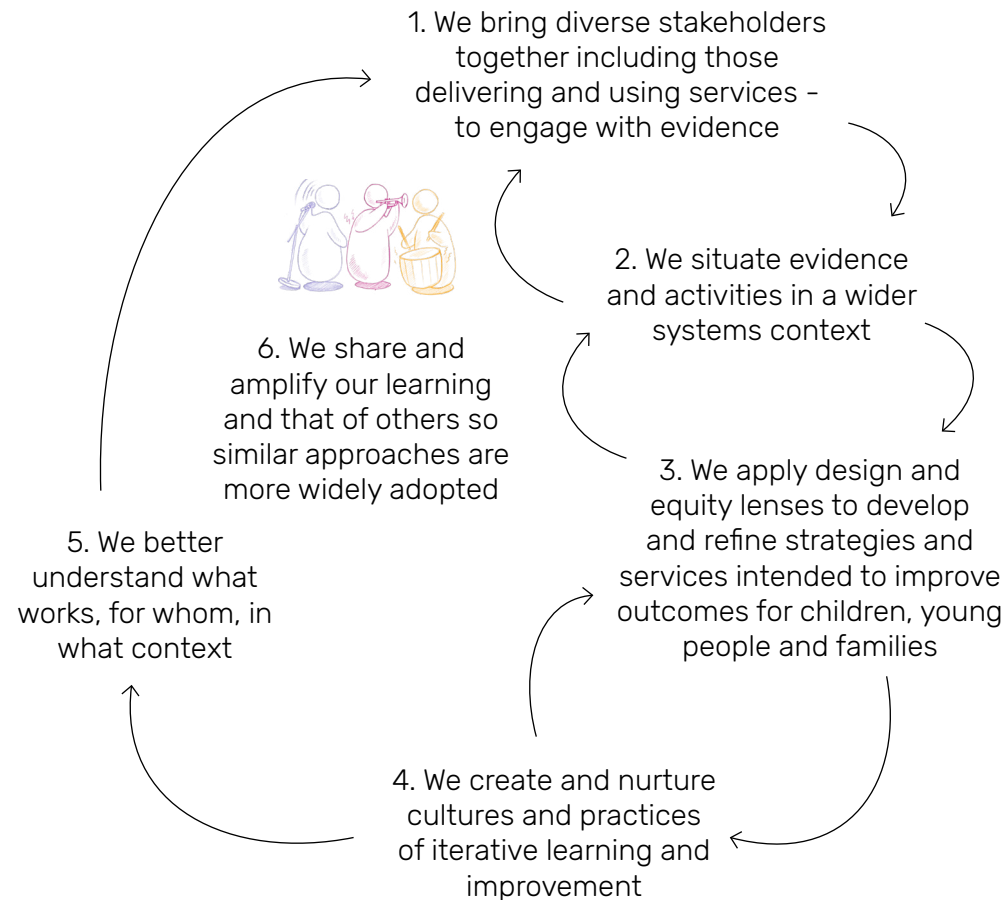
3. Evidence for equity:

Cutting across all our work is a commitment to use social research and design to actively identify and tackle inequality and discrimination. All children and young people should thrive, and we believe that evidence can and should be a driving force in identifying and tackling inequalities and discrimination. We will strive towards anti-racist, anti-discriminatory and anti-extractive research and design in all our activities, and will work with others to make this the norm.

4. Championing innovations in evidence:

As a charitable organisation, we will openly and freely share our learning, methods and approaches. We will, through our work and that of others, highlight innovations in evidence and encourage funders, commissioners and delivery organisations to adopt them.

We see these activities as cyclical and contributing to greater capacity within the sector to adopt the integrated approach to evidence. We also believe this can contribute to better and more evidence over time about what works, for whom, and in what contexts, and greater confidence in how to use it – all in the service of children and young people.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The ideas in this paper are developed from our work over the last five years – work we could not have done without our partners. We are very grateful to them, and to the Dartington Service Design Lab staff, past and present, whose creativity, rigour, and curiosity are at the heart of our strategy.

We shared an earlier draft of this paper with some thoughtful people, and they kindly provided feedback which strengthened it significantly. In particular, we'd like to thank Daniel Acquah, Nerys Anthony, Nick Axford, Nigel Ball, Roger Bullock, Richard Graham, Martina Kane, Jane Lewis, Tom McBride, Kurunda Morgan, Dan Paskins, Andy Ratcliffe, Carolyn Sawers, Jonathan Sharples and Tamsin Shuker.

Sincere thanks also to Rachel Lily and Supreetha Krishnan who edited and designed this report.

Finally, we very grateful to the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, whose support enabled our whole team to spend time developing our learning, and this strategy.





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dartington.org.uk



info@dartington.org.uk



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