

# Creative & Credible

## EVIDENCE REVIEWS

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The first challenge for any evaluation is to establish what is already known about the likely project impacts. An evidence review will establish whether similar projects have been undertaken in comparable settings and will identify important learning from these projects.

The evidence review provides a summary of the available evidence, highlighting what is known about the impact of a project or intervention and where the gaps in knowledge lie (i.e. what is not known). It will establish whether projects similar to the one being evaluated have been undertaken, and it will identify the characteristics of participants, the settings, and the activities that have been tried. Importantly, it will reveal what kind of impacts and outcomes, if any, have been reported. It underpins evidence-based practice, ensuring that current best evidence is used to inform the development and delivery of projects – delivering the right impact, where it is needed.

An evidence review describes what is known about an intervention in terms of its outcomes, its impact and the process involved in its delivery. This is critical information for evaluation planning. It informs the rationale for both the project and the evaluation, helping to identify an approach/methodology. Where extensive evaluation is not possible, an evidence review can also help with advocacy, for example, providing evidence for commissioners that a proposed arts project might address needs that they have identified.

### **Systematic reviews**

Formal evidence reviews often follow the procedures for systematic reviews. These are very structured literature reviews that begin with extensive searching of databases to identify, appraise and, if possible, synthesize evidence relating to a particular research question. Systematic reviews are an accepted part of health care research, and they are also increasingly undertaken in the field of arts and health.

One of the first attempts to systematically map the evidence surrounding arts, health and wellbeing was undertaken by Rosalia Staricoff in 2004. The review was updated with Stephen Cliff in 2011. Systematic reviews tend to focus on published literature. Academic databases are not always

accessible to practitioners and evaluators who work outside of Universities. Fortunately, there is a trend towards open access publishing. A systematic review may be too complex, time consuming and expensive to be undertaken prior to every project. The procedures of systematic reviewing can be used to inform evaluation. These include searching for relevant information, selecting information, and synthesising knowledge. This can include 'grey' literature which contains many arts and health evaluation reports. The 2011 Youth Music review of music and young offenders (Daykin et al. 2011) is an example of an evidence review that encompassed both published and 'grey' literature, drawing out implications for evaluation practice as well as research.

A basic evidence review should seek to reveal the extent and quality of evidence that already exists and expose any key findings as well as gaps in knowledge. When considering evidence it is important to assess its quality, especially if it is being used to inform policy and practice development. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (<http://www.casp-uk.net/>) offers training and resources to help assess the trustworthiness and relevance of evidence. They provide critical appraisal tools, designed to be used when reading research. They include tools for assessing randomised controlled trials, economic evaluations and qualitative studies.

Other useful resources include:

The Google Scholar search engine is useful for findings academic articles, although full text articles may not always be accessible without a university login and password: <http://scholar.google.co.uk/>. Specialist arts and health databases and websites often store useful information about research evidence. See for example the National Alliance for Arts, Health and Wellbeing (<http://www.artshealthandwellbeing.org.uk/>). The Arts Alliance Evidence Library, is an online resource that houses research and evidence for the impact of arts on health and wellbeing in the criminal justice system (<http://artsevidence.org.uk/>).

## References

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