# Convincing campaigns: using hard evidence

## Evidence – the reason to campaign and the route to success

Policy makers can often be persuaded to make changes if you can effectively demonstrate the detriment caused by policy failure.

Evidence of injustice is therefore generally both the catalyst behind a campaign and the key to its success. First of all, you need to be alert to problems where campaigning intervention could prevent others experiencing the same. You then might need to collect further evidence, specifically to add weight to a campaign on the issue you've chosen to address.

This guidance covers; how to spot trends and prioritise which issues to campaign on, how to collect supporting evidence from service users, and how to subsequently use it to best effect.

## Identifying the issues that require action

When deciding where to channel your campaigning energies, it's important to remember that the issues you personally see most evidence of, are not necessarily the best candidates for the subject of a campaign.

You may well choose to campaign on widespread, ongoing issues in the end, such as delays in housing benefits or social fund refusals, but there are other options, including:
- issues that are infrequent but important e.g. severe injustice for a small group of people
- new problems, perhaps resulting from a change in the law or changes in the policies and practices of a service provider or employer.

There are many sources of evidence to consider other than your own experiences, for example:
- discussions at staff and trustee board meetings about trends and emerging issues
- liaison with other local groups
- issues raised by another organisation in a consultation
- contact with a national network or membership organisation.

When you're aware of all the issues and are weighing up which to tackle, you might consider; the likelihood of success, the consequences for service users if the issue is not pursued, whether the issue is local and unlikely to be taken up by anyone else, the level of resources your agency has for campaigning, and, crucially, the availability of evidence to support your case.

# Collecting evidence from service users to support a particular campaign

Evidence is the backbone of any credible campaign for change. Assuming you're going to use evidence from your own service users, you must have systems for recording the information they give you, and for analysing and presenting it. Ideally you need both a quantity of evidence to show the scale of the problem and qualitative evidence that highlights the human impact of any policy failings.

If you belong to a national network, you may be in the practice of recording service user contacts in a national database. But even if you don't have an evidence retrieval system in operation, you probably nonetheless collect statistics for funding or other purposes. This guidance is not designed to tell you how to set up an evidence retrieval system, but it does identify some key points to consider.

## Quantitative evidence

You will need to demonstrate how many people are affected by the issue you are addressing. Being able to do that properly requires:

- Deciding on an appropriate level of detail for recording issues. Is it enough to record a case simply as 'housing benefit' or do you need to identify subsidiary categories such as 'delays in assessment'?
- Distinguishing between users and issues. A service user may raise more than one issue e.g. welfare benefits and housing.
- Ensuring that your statistics relate to an identifiable time period e.g. monthly.
- Having a system (manual or electronic) for collating and analysing statistics on a regular basis.

## Qualitative evidence

You will also need to provide case study evidence that shows how people are affected by the issue you are addressing. You will need the following as a minimum:

1) Information about the service user including age, area of residence, gender, ethnicity etc. You will need to balance enhanced detail with what you feel able to ask your clients.
2) A clear subject heading to facilitate filing and retrieval.
3) The cause of the problem, including the identity of third parties.
4) A description of the impact of the problem on the service user and their family.
5) All relevant facts including dates, figures, correspondence etc.
6) A means of getting back to the service user if you want more information or to involve them in your policy work.

## Supplementing your routine evidence

When planning your campaign, make sure that whatever evidence you routinely collect will be appropriate. You may require additional information for some campaigns. This can be sourced in various ways, such as a survey of service users, or by bringing in evidence from other agencies.

### Conducting a survey

Surveys can be complicated to design and time consuming to conduct, so get expert help (possibly from a local college) and the support of your management team. So far as possible, aim to keep it simple; even something short can generate useful evidence, with the bonus of being relatively easy for service users to complete and for you to analyse. It is always worth piloting your survey to make sure it will work in practice.

Involving other agencies can make good sense because they may enable you to survey a wider public, niche interest groups or both. Allow plenty of time if you want other agencies to administer a survey, as you may need to consult them over the design of the form and the timescale within which it's to be carried out. You must issue clear guidelines on how to carry out the survey to ensure consistency, and every survey form should include the closing date and the return address.

A group in south west England mailed partners twice during the collection period, informing them of progress. This helped to maintain enthusiasm and a steady flow of returns. They also collated incoming results weekly so that the evidence was ready to use at the end of the survey period.

### Evidence from other agencies

Before you partner with another agency in order to access their evidence (see 'Finding and working with campaign partners') make sure you consider the following questions:

- Are they aware that's your intention, and will they be happy for you to do so?
- Are their evidence records compatible with yours, allowing you to get a 'bigger picture'?
- Are you confident their evidence is accurate and reliable?

## How to use the evidence

There are many ways in which the evidence collected can be used. Maximising impact may mean using a number of different methods at the same time. Evidence could be used in:

- Giving feedback to service providers, for example letters to or meetings with local authority officers about policies and practices.
- Drawing the attention of MPs and councillors to local and national issues.
- Writing briefings, reports and submissions for service providers, regulatory and consultative bodies.
- Undertaking media and publicity work (see 'Writing a press release that stands out' and 'How to pitch to journalists').
- Working in collaboration with other agencies or interested groups (see 'Finding and working with campaign partners').

### Tips for producing a written report

If the problem is widespread, a full written report may be a good way to demonstrate the extent of the evidence. When writing a report of this kind, make sure you identify the source of any evidence quoted in case you need to check additional detail or respond to a challenge.

Only start work on your report when you already have plenty of evidence to support your case. Sometimes you may find that a few pieces of powerful evidence point to a significant local issue, but more evidence fails to materialise. In this case, a different approach is probably the best way forward.

See also ‘Producing a local social policy report’.

## Tips for involving service users directly

Your evidence is likely to have more impact if you can combine statistical information showing the extent of the problem with qualitative evidence illustrating its impact at an individual level. One or two powerful case studies from service users willing to ‘go public’ about their problem, in their own words, can really add to the persuasiveness of your case.

People often respond well to the idea that their story can be used to push for change and are happy for it to feature in the media, or even to be interviewed by a journalist. But remember, unless you have explicit permission to divulge information that could identify a service user, you must always anonymise the story in such a way that protects their confidentiality. Even without names and addresses an unusual case could be identifiable to people who know the individual involved.

See also ‘Convincing campaigns: placing service users centre stage’ and ‘Bringing your messages to life: working with clients as case studies’.