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Making meaningful recommendations for policy and practice: reflections from the evaluation of ask and act

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Making meaningful recommendations for policy and practice: reflections from the evaluation of Ask and Act

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Date submitted: 28th February 2023

Abstract

This article explores how the research process implemented in a Welsh Government commissioned evaluation of Ask and Act contributed to making meaningful recommendations for policy and practice. Ask and Act is a type of training delivered across the public service in Wales to identify violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence. The article draws on reflections from the research team, including the principal investigator/contractor from Sheffield

Hallam University, and Welsh Government social researchers and policy colleagues. It concludes with five key considerations and associated questions to support those planning and undertaking similar research projects or evaluations.

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Background

The Evaluation

In September 2020, the Welsh Government commissioned Sheffield Hallam University and Sonnet Advisory and Impact to undertake a process and outcomes evaluation of Ask and Act. Ask and Act is a process of targeted enquiry to be practiced across the public service to identify violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence. The Welsh Government's national strategy on violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV) 2016-2021 sets out a commitment to train relevant professionals to provide effective, timely and appropriate responses to victims and survivors; Ask and Act is an example of this type of training. Welsh Women's Aid were contracted to develop and deliver the training materials which were piloted in two organisations in 2016 with further sites joining the pilot in 2017. A 'train the trainer' model was implemented which provides accredited training enabling learners to 'ask and act' and to plan and deliver Ask and Act Awareness training in their organisations. Since the pilot, Welsh Women's Aid continue to rollout the training across Wales. As of April 2022, 16,931 people have received Ask and Act training. An evaluation of the rollout of training in health boards was undertaken in 2020, which revealed a high level of commitment and priority given to the delivery of Ask and Act training, whilst also identifying challenges in measuring impact and ensuring consistency of delivery across Wales. However, there was a need to conduct a full independent evaluation to include perspectives from other public services delivering the training (such as local authorities and the fire and rescue service).

The aims of the evaluation were:

- to explore the effectiveness of the implementation of the training to date

- to explore the impact of the Ask and Act training on individuals and consequently to assess how successful it is in meeting the aims of Ask and Act

The contract manager for the evaluation was a Welsh Government social researcher who is guided by the Government Social Research (GSR) code which sets outs the professional standards of GSR (UK Government, 2018). In order to ensure these standards are met, social researchers at Welsh Government work within a six-stage Quality Assurance Framework (QAF). Communication considerations and research impact which is stage six of the QAF suggests holding a project review and closure meeting and submitting an article to the social research practice journal. At the end of the project the contract manager arranged a closure meeting with the contractors (Sheffield Hallam University), and Welsh Government officials including VAWDASV policy colleagues and the head of social justice research. Honest reflections were shared at the closure meeting about what worked well, performance and deliverables against timetables and how the evaluation's recommendations were being used or would be used; it was this meeting that initiated the focus for this article.

Overview of Literature

A substantial body of literature focuses on evaluation theory and methodological frameworks. This literature provides useful insights on designing effective process and impact evaluations and guidance on communicating results and implementing recommendations. The principles outlined in this literature underpinned and are evident in our approach to this evaluation and will be discussed in the following sections.

Donald Kirkpatrick's extensive work provides a model for evaluating the effectiveness of training programmes/initiatives (Kirkpatrick and Kayser Kirkpatrick, 2016). The model consists of four levels: reaction, learning, behaviour and results, with successive levels of the model indicating greater levels of effectiveness of the training (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, 2015).

Reynolds et al. (2014) share lessons learned from evaluating complex health interventions. The authors highlight the importance of shared understanding across the research team of how each member will contribute to the aims of the project and the facilitation of ongoing communication, collaboration and reflection across the team throughout.

The importance of developing effective relationships between the evaluation team and the commissioner to ensure the success of an evaluation is highlighted by Fox et al. (2016). They also discuss the benefits of evaluators being aware of organisational contexts and dynamics in order to carry out an effective process evaluation. Finally, the value of devoting a substantial amount of time to the generation of recommendations, with involvement from key stakeholders who will be utilising them, is argued.

Phoenix et al (2019) focus on the question of effectively communicating research findings and recommendations to influence policy. They highlight the importance of adapting presentation and communication styles to the audience, developing and maintaining relationships with policymakers, ensuring the research is relevant to policymakers and utilising 'windows of opportunity'.

Purpose of the paper

This article aims to examine in more detail how the research process in this evaluation contributed to making meaningful recommendations for the development of Ask and Act. In order to achieve this, we reflect on the impact of the whole research process, including the commissioning stage, the methodological approach of the evaluation, publication of the final report and implementation of the recommendations. We aim to highlight good practice around developing and presenting useful recommendations, particularly in government social research reports. We hope the five key considerations and associated questions in the conclusion are useful for others when planning and undertaking similar research projects or evaluations to ensure recommendations for policy and practice are helpful and meaningful, and make a positive contribution to evidence-informed policy making.

Methodology

The evaluation utilised a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods and included both primary data collection and secondary data analysis. The key stages of the evaluation are shown below in Table 1:

Inception	Pre-stage 1: Commissioning	- Research specification developed by Welsh Government social researchers. - Competitive tender process.
	Stage 1: Scoping	- Qualitative interviews (x10) with strategic stakeholders. - Identification of secondary data. - Observations of training sessions (x3).
Process and outcome evaluation	Stage 2: Secondary data analysis	- Including training materials, monitoring tools, evaluation reports and delivery data.
	Stage 3: Workshop	- Half-day online workshop with 6 participants experienced in delivering Ask and Act training.

	Stage 4: Interviews	- In-depth interviews (x42) with individuals involved in coordinating, delivering or participating in Ask and Act training. - Including professionals in a range of roles, such as training leads, trainers and learners from local authorities, health boards and third sector specialists across Wales.
	Stage 5: Survey	- Online survey to collect large-scale data on the outcomes of Ask and Act. - 382 responses.
	Stage 6: Analysis and reporting	- Transcription of interviews and thematic analysis. Analysis of survey data. - Outputs: Full report, executive summary and slide deck of key findings, available here: www.gov.wales/evaluation-ask-and-act
	Stage 7: Next steps	- Implementation of recommendations.

Table 1: Stages of evaluation

Key findings

Key findings from the process and outcomes evaluation included:

Process evaluation

- The delivery of Ask and Act is complex and common challenges to effective delivery related to capacity of staff to attend and deliver training and turnover of staff.
- Allocation of business and administration support in coordinating the training was valuable, as well as collaboration and co-delivery with third-sector specialists in VAWDASV.
- There was overwhelming agreement on the need for Ask and Act and respondents recognised the gap that the training filled and the need to prioritise this. The 'train-the-trainer' model of delivery was generally supported.
- The importance of continued funding from Welsh Government for Ask and Act was highlighted in order to maintain delivery of training.

- Monitoring and evaluation of the training is challenging, particularly when training is delivered online. The development of processes and systems to enable consistent and ongoing monitoring is important.

Outcomes evaluation

- Ask and Act training had a number of positive impacts including increasing knowledge and awareness of the signs and symptoms of VAWDASV and different forms of VAWDASV. Confidence in 'asking and acting' was also improved following training.
- Significant numbers of respondents reported that they had provided direct support for survivors or potential survivors following their training and a small number had been able to disclose VAWDASV that they themselves had experienced.
- Ask and Act is influencing the culture relating to VAWDASV in organisations, with impacts on supporting more survivors, ensuring survivors have more positive experiences when disclosing VAWDASV, and increased awareness of, and support for, VAWDASV at an organisational level.
- Ways in which Ask and Act could be improved were identified, including filling gaps in training content, which would help trainers to feel confident in delivering training. However, delivering alongside specialists and the ability to adapt the training package to suit different organisations was found to be helpful.
- The Covid-19 pandemic had a considerable impact on the rollout of Ask and Act training, resulting in a delay while training was moved online. Most have adapted well to delivering online, however, interaction with the training content was reported to be lower and additional safeguards were put in place to support participants remotely. On the other hand, online delivery made the training more easily accessible, removing travel time and expenses and being more convenient for attendees.

The key findings indicate effectiveness across three levels of the Kirkpatrick model (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, 2015), e.g. through support of the model of training (Level 1: Reaction), increased knowledge and awareness of the subject (Level 2: learning) and providing support following training (Level 3: Behaviour). Longer-term monitoring, as suggested in the recommendations, will be needed to identify the effectiveness of the programme at Level 4 of the model (Results).

Discussion

This section will explore key factors to consider in enabling the development of meaningful and deliverable recommendations. We provide examples from the Ask and Act evaluation to explore how design and methodological approach of an evaluation alongside effective partnership working throughout can maximise the effectiveness of evaluations, and ensure that the resulting recommendations are as useful as possible. We highlight learning that could be applied to projects of a similar nature in future.

Working in partnership

As highlighted in the overview of literature, development of effective relationships and shared understanding between the researchers and commissioners is crucial to

the success of the evaluation (Reynolds et al., 2014, Fox et al., 2016). As such, this was a central consideration in our evaluation approach.

Communication and shared understanding

The invitation to tender and brief for the evaluation from Welsh Government clearly set out the rationale for the evaluation, including detailed information on the policy and historical context for Ask and Act, the process of development, piloting and rollout of the programme and the aims and objectives underpinning it. The brief also included research questions and sub-questions alongside suggested methods to shape the evaluation.

In particular, the suggestion in the invitation to tender of an initial scoping phase proved to be a crucial element of the evaluation. This reflected a recognition of the complexity of the programme and the need for the contractor to gain a deeper understanding of the context, structure and processes underpinning Ask and Act in order to undertake an effective evaluation.

Upon commencement of the contract, a key point of contact for the Welsh Government (research manager) and Sheffield Hallam University (principal investigator) was established and maintained throughout. This ensured ongoing clear communication and shared expectations and understanding. Monthly meetings involving the wider teams provided regular opportunities to share emerging findings and progress updates ensuring that the evaluation stayed on track and any issues were resolved as they emerged. The development of these wider relationships and communication channels also meant that, when there was a change of contract manager at Welsh Government, the evaluation was able to continue unaffected.

This strategy of ongoing regular communication maximised the impact and success of the evaluation. For example, following the scoping stage, a meeting was held to discuss the recommendations and approach outlined in the interim report, enabling feedback and agreement of ongoing aims and research activities. Similarly, when the survey was live, the team met to consider how to boost response rates and actions were agreed. Regular meetings also helped to identify opportunities to utilise the emerging evaluation findings at an important and time-sensitive stage of policy-making, for example, providing emerging evidence to inform the consultation on the VAWDASV strategy under the new Programme for Government in early 2021.

Relationship-building

The evaluation was designed with a strong focus on relationship-building from beginning to end to facilitate the success of the project. The close collaborative working relationship between Welsh Government and the research team within Sheffield Hallam University, meant that VAWDASV professionals and other key stakeholders were quickly engaged, and all parties were able to communicate and express their views with confidence and develop or build upon existing working relationships.

During the scoping stage, conducting interviews with key strategic stakeholders generated support for research activities at later stages. For example, Welsh Women's Aid colleagues provided access to secondary data, such as training materials and allowed the contractors to attend various training sessions to observe the training first-hand. The contractors attended quarterly steering group meetings where emerging issues and experiences from across the regions were brought together and discussed. This helped them to understand the context in which the training was being delivered and stay informed and up-to-date on programme developments and pertinent information regarding the rollout of the training. Through attendance at these meetings, relationships were also developed with Welsh Government and relevant authority colleagues who later supported evaluation activities, for example through recruitment of interviewees, distribution of the survey, and reviewing and piloting research tools.

This engagement between the contractors and key stakeholders from the outset was key to the success of the evaluation, particularly as the nature and high volume of work in the VAWDASV sector means that approaching and communicating with professionals with sensitivity is especially important.

Evidence-based staged approach

Answering the research questions

Each of the research activities were mapped to the research questions to ensure the questions were fully addressed by the evaluation and to provide a clear structure and rationale for the activities.

The evaluation utilised a staged approach (see Figure 1 above) wherein data collected at each stage of the evaluation were used to inform and shape the following stages to ensure the robustness, validity and sensitivity of the evaluation. For example, findings from the scoping stage (Stage 1) were presented in an interim report, and included evidence-based recommendations for the following stages. The evaluation plan was updated and refined outlining the proposed methodology and emerging areas of focus. A detailed sampling framework and recruitment strategy for the interviews and survey was presented at this stage. Draft topic guides and survey questions were then developed based on these findings and discussions with Welsh Government.

Flexibility

The staged approach of the evaluation allowed for flexibility and adaptability of the research design and methods and included clear milestones at which these were revisited, developed and refined based on emerging findings. For example, survey questions were carefully developed based on findings from research activities in all previous stages. Knowledge and evidence accumulated throughout the evaluation meant the research team could be confident that survey questions and answer options would be meaningful and relevant to respondents, and would effectively address the research questions.

Development of the recommendations

Once the data had been analysed and discussed in detail in the findings section of the final report, the contractors collated and summarised the findings under each of the research questions, forming a conclusion section. This allowed for identification of areas where the Ask and Act programme was performing well and/or having impact, as well as gaps and areas for improvement, with both being crucial in the development of recommendations.

For example, findings relating to *RQ1: How effective is the delivery of Ask and Act across the relevant authorities?* highlighted common challenges faced in the delivery of the training. Some challenges related to capacity and logistics of the training schedule. Recommendations aiming to address these challenges included:

> **Recommendation 3:** *More flexibility for relevant authorities in accessing Ask and Act training in response to specific relevant authorities' level of demand / capacity to deliver and/or need to train additional trainers. For example, providing a rolling training programme allowing relevant authorities to book individuals onto training outside of the scheduled training programme rollout to ensure organisations can maintain a pool of active trainers.*

And:

> **Recommendation 4:** *Continuation of some online training sessions to enable greater flexibility and remove geographical barriers to attendance.*

As well as addressing challenges, the recommendations also focused on areas of strength of the Ask and Act programme which should be continued. For example, participants commonly highlighted the importance and value of co-delivery with third-sector specialists. A recommendation relating to this finding was therefore included:

> **Recommendation 1:** *Continued and additional support and funding from Welsh Government for relevant authorities to enable organisations to allocate greater resources (staff time for trainers and administration) to the programme and secure support from specialist partners.*

Collaboration / co-production of recommendations

As wider literature suggests, it is important to involve key stakeholders in the development of recommendations to ensure they are meaningful and effective (Fox et al., 2016). With this in mind, consideration of recommendations started very early on in the research process with the requirement for 'actionable recommendations' in the final report being clearly expressed in the research specification (Pre-Stage 1). The production of recommendations was also a key objective for both the process and outcome evaluation. For example, one of the objectives for the process evaluation was to review existing monitoring information and data availability in order to provide recommendations for future monitoring of the programme; and one of the objectives for the outcome evaluation was to explore the effectiveness of Ask and Act and provide recommendations for improvements to Ask and Act training.

At Stage 6 of the evaluation, the report writing stage, the recommendations were drafted and presented under the following three themes: 1) delivery and rollout, 2) course content and training materials and 3) evaluation. Subheadings were included under each theme and recommendations were presented in bullet point form underneath these.

A team meeting was held at this stage which focused on the presentation and communication of recommendations in the report to ensure ease of dissemination and use by various Welsh Government officials following publication. Following this, the recommendations were re-packaged and sharpened under each theme, with the subheadings removed and numbered bullet points included instead. For more complex recommendations, or where further specificity or examples were needed, the recommendation was divided into sub-sections (a, b, c, etc.).

As well as having discussions about the visual presentation of the recommendations, dialogue also took place around increasing the specificity of recommendations to ensure they were actionable. For example, one of the recommendations within the 'evaluation' theme was originally presented as:

> *'Ongoing monitoring and evaluation nationally to monitor longer-term outcomes'.*

On reading the first draft the contract manager posed the following question to the principal investigator - *"do you have any suggestions about how to do this?"* The contractor responded with practical suggestions, revising the recommendation to:

> *'Ongoing monitoring and evaluation nationally to monitor longer-term outcomes, including through development of template data collection tools (e.g. a shorter version of the survey used in this evaluation) to enable more consistent data collection and inclusion of Ask and Act on national indicators which local authorities are required to report on'.*

This is a good example of how the positive relationships formed among the team early on in the project enabled open dialogue and effective partnership working during this stage. Moreover, the research team was patient throughout the research process with the development of the recommendations and allocated sufficient time to ensuring their usefulness and accessibility.

Implementation of recommendations

Fifteen recommendations were included in the final report and this sub-section highlights some examples of how recommendations from each theme have been implemented in policy and practice following publication of the report.

Many of the recommendations will be incorporated within the new contract specification (to be awarded in autumn 2022) and the revised Ask and Act guidance published here: https://gov.wales/ask-and-act-guidance-addendum-html. This independent evaluation of Ask and Act was crucial to informing any changes to the Ask and Act programme. Welsh Government officials felt that the recommendations

were clear and concise which allowed for policy colleagues and VAWDASV professionals to have a clear direction for the changes that were needed to improve delivery of the Ask and Act programme.

As highlighted earlier, some recommendations focused on the need for continued support and funding from Welsh Government to enable sufficient resources to be allocated by relevant authorities to effectively deliver the training. As such, Welsh Government has committed to continuing funding for a further three years to support the delivery of training (including the Subsidy Grant which enables authorities to bring in specialist organisations to support training). In response to a number of recommendations, Welsh Government is also implementing some changes to processes and guidance to enable more flexibility and effective planning in the delivery of training. For example, relevant authorities will be able to offer online and/or in-person training to best suit their needs. Pan-Wales train-the-trainer sessions will also be offered, meaning that regions will not have to wait for local sessions to train trainers. Additionally, refresher training will be available to ensure trainers are able to keep their skills up-to-date and feel confident in delivering training.

Some recommendations have not yet been taken forward but will be listed as a requirement to take forward in the new contract. These include changes and developments to the Ask and Act training materials. Other recommendations will require further work to be taken forward due to the need for wider engagement with policymakers beyond the Ask and Act programme.

Conclusion

This article has discussed how the research process can support making meaningful recommendations in evaluations of government programmes or initiatives. The article examined the research process by drawing on reflections from the research team including the principal investigator/contractor, and Welsh Government social researchers and policy colleagues.

Despite the numerous stages and stakeholders involved in the evaluation, a key enabling factor for the success of the project was the shared consensus and overall support for the aims of Ask and Act (i.e. improving identification and support for victims and survivors of VAWDASV).

We conclude with five key considerations and associated questions for commissioners and contractors to support them in producing meaningful and deliverable recommendations.

1. **Ensure the requirements for recommendations are clearly communicated at the beginning of the research process and that this requirement is reflected in the design and methodology of the evaluation.**

Questions:

- What is the purpose of the evaluation? How will the findings be used?
- Are the requirements for the recommendations clearly communicated?
- Is there a rationale for why the recommendations are needed?
- To what extent will the design and methodology help to produce meaningful recommendations?

2. **Build in time to develop positive relationships and networking opportunities early on. Ensure there is ongoing dialogue and collaboration *between* the research team (e.g. contractors, commissioners) and wider stakeholders, and *within* the research team itself.**

   Questions:

   - Has a key point of contact from the commissioner and contractor side been identified? Who should this be? How will you communicate? How frequently? What are the requirements in terms of progress updates, milestones, etc?
   - How can the wider members of the team be engaged effectively, i.e. kept up to date with progress and able to contribute and support but not be overburdened?
   - Are you aware of any relevant networks or stakeholders who could support the evaluation? What opportunities are there for the contractors to engage meaningfully with these stakeholders from an early stage of the evaluation?

3. **Consider utilising a staged approach to allow flexibility and integration of evidence-based recommendations into later stages of the evaluation. Revisit the research questions regularly to ensure they are being addressed by the methods and that they continue to be relevant to the aims of the evaluation.**

   Questions:

   - How will the design and methodology allow the research questions to be addressed?
   - Are the methods producing data which addresses the research questions?
   - To what extent is there flexibility in the design to adapt the methods or the focus of research questions as the evaluation progresses? Are there clear and agreed opportunities for flexibility in the research design?

4. **Consider how recommendations could be co-produced (i.e. through collaboration between contractor and commissioner) to maximise their usefulness.**

   Questions:

   - Are the recommendations specific enough to enable implementation? Can they be refined? Can the recommendations be grouped or themed?
   - Who will be implementing the recommendations? How will they be shared to reach the most appropriate person?
   - Is the target audience clear?
   - Are the recommendations presented in a way that will be user-friendly to those implementing them?

5. **Appreciate and acknowledge the context and roles of the research team throughout the research process to ensure the overall success of the project.**

   Questions:

   - In what ways do you develop an awareness of others' priorities, workloads and expertise? How do you acknowledge these and ensure they are respected?
   - Are there clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the project team? Is there a shared understanding of expectations? How are these managed and maintained?
   - How do you maintain boundaries between the commissioner and contractor to ensure the findings and recommendations are evidence-based and robust (e.g. objective, independent and ethical)?

Article text ends

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