



# Adding Value to Grant-making: Northern Rock Foundation's 'Research/Project' Approach Executive Summary

## This innovative partnership between Northern Rock Foundation and the University of Bristol:

- Has provided evidence to suggest that the Foundation's research/project approach has **positively impacted** on the domestic and sexual abuse sector in the region (and wider), providing an important and robust evidence base for service, project and policy development.
- Has improved our understanding of how the Foundation can make its research knowledge and evidence work harder to **maximise its impact** on projects, policy and practice by focused planning for commissioning, governance and knowledge translation.

## Creating impact:

- Has 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.
- Has shown that creating wider impact from research knowledge and evidence is an ongoing and active process that requires **facilitation**, a role that Trusts and Foundations are well placed to take on and that does not necessarily lie solely with those who either produce or use the research.

- Has highlighted the **potential central role of the funder/grant programme manager** as a conduit for the translation and transfer of knowledge and evidence to maximise the chance of its successful application in policy and/or practice.

## Introduction

Foundations that fund research need to make the knowledge and evidence produced work hard to get maximum value from it. 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 report presents the findings of an innovative knowledge transfer partnership (KTP) project between Northern Rock Foundation (hereafter the Foundation) and the University of Bristol, which set out to assess how using a 'research/project' approach to grant-making could increase the impact of the Foundation's programmes, and to demonstrate the added value of this approach to other funders. The project has improved the Foundation's understanding as to how research and evidence can generate impact through planning, commissioning and delivering research projects in order to help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of its current and future investment in the third sector.



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## Northern Rock Foundation

Since 1998 the Foundation has provided grant funding to organisations in the North East and Cumbria which help people who are vulnerable, disadvantaged, homeless, living in poverty or are victims of crime or discrimination. It also supports training, research and demonstration work, and shares learning from the activities it funds. Where appropriate, it seeks to inform and influence regional and national policies and practice as well as developments in the wider 'Trust and Foundation' community.

The Foundation is seen as a key stakeholder within the regional domestic abuse field, its longstanding interest beginning in 2001 when it funded Sunderland University to conduct a piece of needs-led research into attrition rates of domestic violence cases in the Criminal Justice System in the North East. The study led to a series of unique research projects, the development of a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship between the Foundation and the research community, and informed the Foundation's eventual decision to invest £4million to pilot and evaluate a comprehensive response to abuse using multi-agency demonstration projects (in rural and urban areas of the region). Consequently, in 2007 the 'Safety and Justice for Victims of Abuse' grant programme was launched to specifically fund organisations that support people who experience domestic abuse, sexual violence and sexual exploitation along with related research.

## The 'research/project' approach

The Foundation's 'Safety and Justice' programme combines grant-making with sector-specific research and capacity-building activities to address its regional priorities. This 'research/project' approach is driven by a desire to affect social change through informed and intelligent grant-making based on passion for the cause and generation of learning. The Foundation's practice

for funding research projects has evolved over a period of time from a traditional grant-making and tendering process to a more sophisticated, collaborative commissioning approach to fill identified knowledge gaps and provide a more in-depth understanding within the domestic and sexual abuse field (including theory, process and practice). The grant programme manager uses, and shares more widely, the learning from the research projects to improve grant-making practice within and beyond the region, whilst capitalising on closely bound networks in the sector and the opportunities for data access to further strengthen the evidence base. The approach has resulted in a narrowing of regional knowledge gaps and, combined with a relatively small amount of funding for project support and development, has effectively contributed to building the capacity of the sector.

## The KTP project between the Foundation and University of Bristol

The Foundation came to believe that this 'research/project' approach generated more of an impact than other grant-making approaches, which do not use research in the same way. To test this belief, the Foundation and the University of Bristol were awarded KTP funding from the Technology Strategy Board and the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) to provide the Foundation and its Trustees with specialist, academic support and robust evidence of the specific and potential impact of this element of the 'Safety and Justice' programme. The KTP project provided evidence of the potential contribution of the research/project approach to policy and practice, identified what elements of the approach work or do not work to create impact and leverage. The findings have been used to develop a new model of grant-making to inform work in the Foundation's other programmes<sup>1</sup> in order to maximise the value of the Foundation's future investment.

<sup>1</sup> Managing Money; Having a Home; Enabling Independence and Choice; Changing Lives

## Assessing impact

### Method

Impact can be multifaceted and there is widespread acknowledgement of the conceptual difficulties involved in understanding and measuring the social and other impacts of research (Aiken 2010). To obtain a comprehensive picture of the different 'mechanisms' of impact we examined in detail six of the Foundation's projects involving research (identified through an initial review of Foundation activity in relation to domestic abuse between 2001 and 2010), covering different aspects of the Safety and Justice Programme, different timeframes, methodologies and subject focus. The six projects informed three case studies.

The domestic violence and criminal justice system case study built on three linked research projects to provide evidence about the response of the criminal justice system to cases of domestic abuse and improve understanding of the dynamics of domestic abuse victimisation and perpetration. These three research projects spanned a time period of 2001–2009. The first of these, 'Making it Through the Criminal Justice System: Domestic Violence and Attrition in the Criminal Justice System', was published by the Foundation in 2003 and informed the Foundation's decision to invest £4million in an experimental longitudinal project, the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (2004–2011), which included an evaluation element and was the focus of the second case study. The third case study built on a series of studies of sex markets and sexual exploitation across the North East and Cumbria, funded between 2007 and 2009.

We wanted to understand the extent to which the research project outputs had affected or potentially benefitted individuals and organisations, ie to track their 'reach'. Methods of quantitative analysis, such as citation analysis or bibliometrics, have been most commonly used as a measure of research impact but this type of

analysis does not measure the future potential of research (Thompson Reuters 2008). As the Foundation's research project outputs go beyond the publication of academic reports we took a largely qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, combined with an extensive web and literature search and documentary analysis to effectively track the research projects' outputs and outcomes.

To understand how impact occurred we drew on ideas about knowledge translation, ie the steps between the creation of new knowledge and its application to yield beneficial outcomes for society (Sudsawad 2007), and explored the processes involved in the dissemination and use of the research knowledge produced.

Stakeholder interviews: a) provided valuable insight into perceptions of the value of the Foundation's research projects, ie beyond the usual outputs and outcomes (we did not pre-define the notion of impact); b) captured the subtle and non-linear outcomes and impact; and c) generated further avenues for tracking impact. Combining this data with information gathered during the web and literature searches, we were able to illustrate impact by extracting practical examples of the utilisation, outcomes and reach of the research project outputs in terms of both strategic and operational impact. This triangulation of methods helped to build a somewhat more realistic reflection of what impact looked like in the context of the research/project approach.

### Limitations

In designing the methodology we did acknowledge that some stakeholders (grantees in particular) would have established good and trustful relationships with the Foundation through long-term relationships and repeated funding contracts and might therefore be inclined to be more protective of the Foundation, especially in the current economic climate. Some grantees might have feared negative repercussions on

future funding applications if negative relationships or issues were reported during the assessment. This was addressed by reiterating confidentiality, anonymity and the independence of the assessment during all stakeholder interviews, stressing that the Foundation was fully committed to learning from the process to inform and improve future grant-making within the third sector.

### Impact

Using a framework of impact type and influence, we assessed whether the research projects had led to either an increase in capacity (*capacity-building impact*); concrete action in the field (*instrumental impact*); shedding light on situations and problems in the field (*conceptual impact*); or confirmation of decisions already made (*symbolic impact*) (Davies et al 2005, ESRC 2010). Changes that occurred as a result of the research process, for example, a change in stakeholder's knowledge or attitudes as a direct result of taking part in the research or knowledge exchange activities (*process impact*), and at what stage the research had any influence (ie at the agenda setting, formulation or implementation stage), were also included within the analysis framework.

Although we cannot quantify the impact, the evidence suggests that the Foundation's research/project approach has positively contributed to knowledge, practice and policy development in the domestic and sexual abuse sector in numerous ways, for example:

- By providing an important and robust evidence base for service and project development in the region (few suggested that the research simply confirmed existing knowledge or choices already made in the field)
- By helping build a robust and informed (practitioner and academic) debate
- By having an important 'convening' effect to improve multi-agency working and inform practice in the North East and Cumbria

- By directly informing local, national and international practice and policy (eg directly informing the development of a county-wide, multi-agency domestic abuse response in Cumbria or training of CJS professionals and domestic abuse legislation change in the USA)
- By leading to new research, informed policymaking, raised awareness and improved understanding within society of domestic abuse and sexual exploitation (and therefore potentially impacting on beneficiaries of the Foundation's future funding).

The interviews and web and literature searches allowed us to track the use of the knowledge and evidence produced, from informing the development of local and national (and international) strategy around domestic abuse and the criminal justice response, to informing ground-level practice within a number of relevant organisations (both locally and nationally, voluntary and statutory). The stakeholder interviews provided evidence of further, secondary outputs and outcomes ('value added') and were key to identifying the perceived factors either preventing or facilitating the use (and therefore possible impact) of the research project outputs.

### Creating impact

Analysis of the variation of outcomes in the case studies and the different processes involved in the translation and transfer of knowledge into practical benefit highlighted a set of conditions that, when combined (in a range of different ways), can influence the extent to which the research project output is used to inform policy and/or practice – and therefore add important value to grant-making in the third sector. We call these the 'routes to impact' and generally the greater the number of routes the wider the reach of influence and impact of the research project.

Figure 1 presents the nine 'routes' to impact identified in our study. The routes are useful

in helping us to think about impact in a more systematic way and can be grouped into three areas of learning in terms of how the Foundation can extract 'full value' from its funded research:

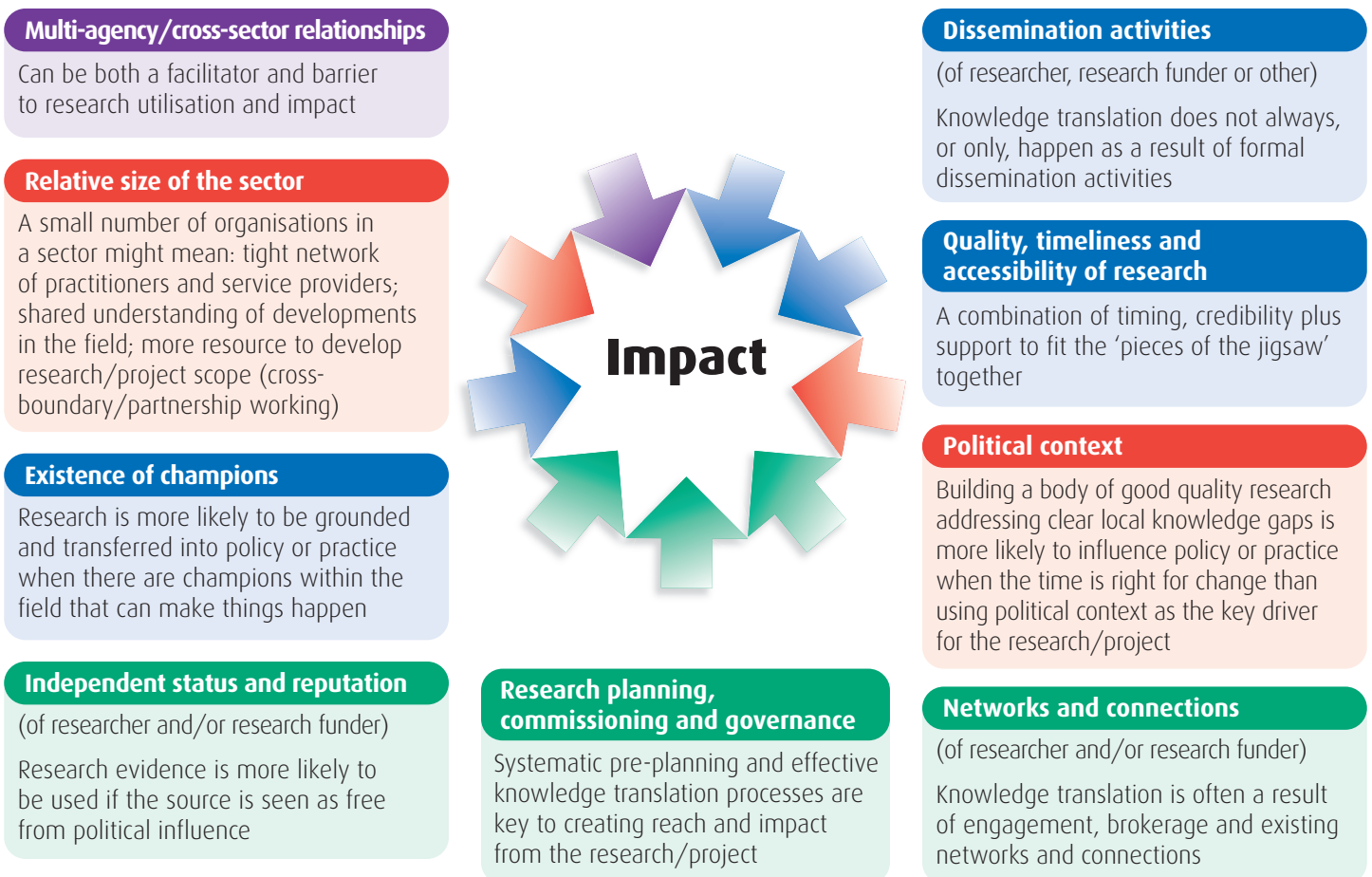
**Research planning, commissioning and governance**

- Systematic pre-planning of each stage of the research/project cycle is key to getting the most from the research project, starting with a clear understanding of its precise aims and objectives, the related theory of change, the needs and expectations of all stakeholders, the total resources required and the desired or expected type and level of impact.
- The routes to impact provide useful guidelines for improving practice, such as capitalising or building on existing networks and opportunities for data access and implementing suitable mechanisms for governance and evaluation.

**Audience receptivity** (the capacity or willingness of the target audience to use the research)

- Understanding the needs of all potential audience(s) and their 'receptiveness' to the research evidence produced is a key route to impact.
- The researcher and/or research funder needs to ensure that the knowledge and evidence produced is seen as credible, rigorous, accessible and relevant to all audiences. At the same time, impact may only result where there is capacity or readiness to implement change and without this even the most rigorous research will not have impact.
- Impact tends to be a function of the political context within which it is received, but the timescales of research and policymaking are not always well matched (OPM 2005). It is important that good quality, robust and well-respected

**Figure 1 Routes to impact**



research evidence is produced to build capacity at the local level and address clear gaps in local knowledge, even though it may not be perceived as of immediate interest to national policymakers.

- Being seen as ‘independent’ (ie free from political influence) gives research credibility, influencing the decision to use it. The Foundation should continue to use its ‘independent status’ to drive the agenda, while also working alongside the statutory sector to facilitate strategic partnership working within and between local authorities and other key agencies (and therefore improve overall response to the issues it seeks to address).
- In order to ensure audience receptivity and utilisation of the research evidence, the researcher needs to be close enough to the sector to understand it but with sufficient distance and academic status to be seen as credible and independent, and with enough reputation in the field to be a ‘draw’ for the target audience.

**Knowledge translation (the two-way processes and methods used to bring together those who produce research and those who use it in order to translate that knowledge into policy or practice)**

- Effective knowledge translation is crucial to bridging the existing gap between the production of research and its use within practice and policy. It is not merely 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.
- Knowledge translation does not only happen as a result of formal dissemination activities and is often a consequence of good communication and engagement, the ‘knowledge broker’ or ‘intermediary’ role, and existing networks and connections of *either* the researcher *or* the research funder (in this case the grant programme manager).

- Research evidence can also be translated and transferred into policy and/or practice when there are ‘champions’ within the sector that can make things happen through their own position, connections and (sometimes) passion for and dedication to the cause. However, the existence of ‘champions’ may depend on the nature and size of the sector and such persons may not always be immediately identifiable or easily accessible.
- Existing multi-agency and cross-sector relationships can be either a facilitator or a barrier to research knowledge being translated and used. While the existence of ‘high powered’ advisory groups or management boards within the research/project process was seen to create a good networking effect and facilitate quicker resolutions to problems and the embedding of practice, problems can arise where not all members of the board or partnership are fully committed to the project’s precise objectives.
- In terms of size of the sector, a smaller number of organisations and tighter network of practitioners and service providers may lead to a better understanding of developments in the field and perhaps more resource available to the grant programme manager to develop the scope of the research (in terms of existing cross-boundary or partnership working), helping to better fit the programme’s objectives and identify and fill the knowledge gaps to inform the strategic vision of the geographical area and sector.

The routes to impact are presented as a ‘set’ of conditions or factors that need to be considered alongside each other, they may have different ‘weights’ and may interact in a variety of combinations to create impact. They provide a checklist of important considerations at all stages of the research/project process, not just the beginning or the end, for maximising the chances of turning research into practical benefit.

## Facilitating impact

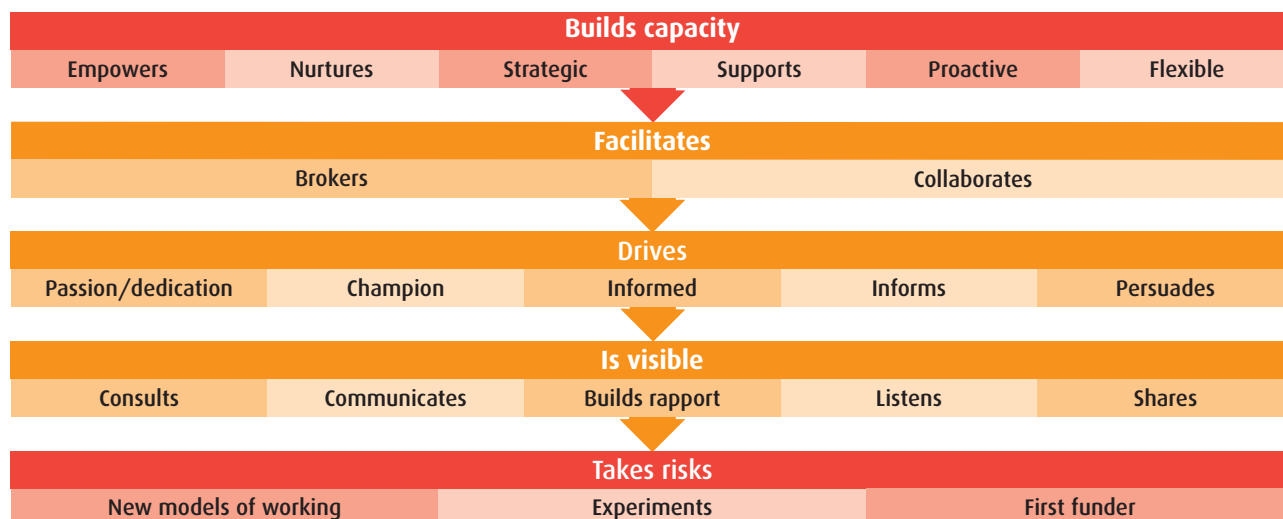
Assessing the impact of the research/project approach over a longer period of time showed that creating wider impact from research knowledge and evidence is an ongoing and active process that requires a driver and/or facilitator(s) of these routes to impact. If effective knowledge translation and transfer activity is a key factor in maximising the chance of turning research knowledge into social change, then whose responsibility is it to drive and facilitate the impact of sector-specific research? Those who produce the research? Or those who use it?

Our study highlighted the important role of the research funder/grant programme manager in facilitating or enhancing the impact of the research/project approach. They, in effect, become an additional player within the ‘impact interface’. The primary purpose of the Foundation’s grant programme managers is to *“provide Trustees of the Foundation with sufficient information and analysis of applications submitted to make their decisions about whether or not to offer grants. A secondary purpose is to assist the Chief Executive in preparing policy for Trustees’ consideration”* (NRF job description). This brief description masks a whole host of roles, skills and behaviours of the

grant programme manager that we were able to unpick during the in-depth assessment of the Safety and Justice Programme approach to grant-making.

Within their ‘day job’, the role of the Foundation’s grant programme manager involves much more than grant-making to community projects (see Figure 2 below). In a ‘critical friend’ capacity, the grant programme manager’s role acts to bridge the local agenda with the national through interpreting local needs and offering a ‘reality check’ to national policymakers. This position has allowed them to act as an independent, formal referee for voluntary organisations within the region. Whilst assessing how outcomes and impact occurred, it became clear that the role of the Foundation grant programme manager as regional ‘champion’ and independent knowledge and relationship broker has been central to the knowledge translation process. They are in an ideal position to facilitate networking and knowledge-sharing between both the voluntary and statutory sector and between local and national practitioners and policymakers. The expertise, skills and knowledge of the grant programme manager, combined with the Foundation’s reputation within the region and its status as an independent funder of sector-specific

**Figure 2 Roles and behaviours of the grant programme manager**



research, means that it has a potential central role in providing a conduit for translation and dissemination of its knowledge and evidence to maximise the chance of its successful application in policy and/or practice.

Therefore, the driver or facilitator of knowledge translation activity, or 'facilitator of impact', does not necessarily lie with those who either *produce* the research or those who *use* it. In order to ensure that its funded research is utilised to full effect, there is an essential and pro-active role for the grant programme manager (or others carrying out similar tasks) to add further leverage in creating impact.

## Summary

The KTP set out to assess the impact of the research/project approach within the Foundation's Safety and Justice Programme and in doing so demonstrated its value through the wide and varied reach of the new knowledge produced (more so than originally expected). The importance of the learning from this process however goes wider, touching upon a number of streams within the wider impact agenda. It contributes to what we know about the impact of social research on the third sector, the impact of the 'funder-plus' approach to grant-making in the third sector and the impact of the Foundation's 'research/project' approach specifically.

As a result of the KTP project, the Foundation understands how, by systematising its internal commissioning, governance and knowledge translation processes, it can make its evidence work harder to maximise the chance of influencing wider policy and practice in related social policy areas. Beyond this, the learning from the KTP adds to the growing body of work to address the wider outcomes-impact gap between the research being completed and being used to influence policy and practice.

## References

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