

More information on using the Guidebook in your local area

This short guide provides some advice about how commissioners and service managers should interpret the information contained in an entry on the Guidebook. This includes information about the intervention, including its features, implementation, and expected impact, as well as information about the evidence, including how confident we should be that the intervention works to produce the expected impact.

How should information about impact be interpreted and applied?	2
Cost	2
Implementability	2
Target population	2
The intervention's outcome	3
The comparison group	3
The timing of the impact	3
How should evidence ratings be interpreted and applied?	4
Level 4	4
Level 3	4
Level 2	4
NL2 (Not Level 2)	4
NE (No Effect)	5
Should I only commission interventions with evidence at Level 4?	5
Should I decommission interventions with evidence at Levels 2 or 3?	5
What does the Guidebook <i>not</i> do?	5



Commissioners who are seeking to commission a new intervention will need a good understanding of the population they serve, the outcomes which are most important to them, the budget available for the intervention, and the specific features of the system in which they are working.

Commissioners may wish to refer to their population needs assessment, workforce assessment, system assessment, monitoring and evaluation data, as well as lived experiences from service users. They should also refer to Foundations' Practice Guides, which are part of the Children's Social Care National Framework. All this information is vital to keep in mind when using the Guidebook.

How should information about impact be interpreted and applied?

The impact of an intervention on outcomes of interest can be found in multiple places on the Guidebook.

It is important to recognise that the expected impact of an intervention is only one piece of information that feeds into a broader commissioning decision. Interpretation of expected impact requires judgement and meaningful use of context. You should consider features of the intervention, the evidence, other interventions, as well as features of your local area. Crucially, a bigger effect is not always better.

The following subsections outline some intervention factors to consider when you are thinking about the impact of an intervention.

Cost

Impact should be considered relative to cost. A small effect may be very practically meaningful and desirable if it is achievable at a low cost. Similarly, what appears to be a larger effect might not be as meaningful if it is only achievable at a prohibitively high cost. The Guidebook includes a cost rating to provide a comparison of the relative cost of interventions.

Implementability

Impact should be considered relative to how straightforward or difficult it will be to implement the intervention in your local area. An effect that appears to be quite small may be practically meaningful and desirable if other similar interventions producing larger effects are prohibitively difficult to implement. The Guidebook describes the implementation requirements of each intervention, to help you make an informed judgement about this.

Target population

When comparing interventions on their impact, it is important to be aware of their target populations. Targeted interventions tend to have larger effects than universal interventions, due to the fact that they have already narrowed down the population of participants to those most likely to benefit. A larger effect under these circumstances is not necessarily more desirable and meaningful than a smaller effect that is achievable for a larger and more diverse group of people. You should consider what you know about your target population and whether it is feasible for you to implement a targeted or universal intervention to achieve the outcomes you are interested in. You may also be seeking to improve outcomes for a population within your community (for example a



specific ethnically minoritised group), in which case you should consider how your target group may respond to the intervention, and if there are any adaptations which may be necessary (for example translation, interpretation, or cultural competence training).

The intervention's outcome

Not all outcomes are equal, and a small effect might actually be practically meaningful and desirable on an important outcome, compared to a larger effect on a less significant outcome. For example, if you are comparing two interventions that ultimately aim to reduce violent crime, a smaller effect on reducing arrests may be more valuable than a larger effect on an intermediary outcome, like improved behaviour. Similarly, an effect that appears to be quite small may be practically meaningful and desirable if there is no evidence of other similar interventions producing larger effects on that outcome. It is crucial to consider what amount of change it is reasonable to expect for the outcome you are interested in.

The comparison group

Often, the estimates of impact described on the Guidebook are calculated by comparing the outcomes of the intervention group to the outcomes of a comparison group who did not receive the intervention. However, in some cases, the comparison group will receive no intervention or services, while in others, the group will receive a different intervention. Generally speaking, effects will be larger when an intervention is compared to 'no intervention', and smaller when an intervention is compared to another, alternative intervention. Therefore, it is important to be aware of the nature of the comparison group and consider this in your decision-making. A smaller effect when an intervention is compared to alternative intervention (which may itself be effective) is not necessarily less meaningful or desirable than a larger effect when the intervention is compared to no intervention.

The timing of the impact

It is not unusual to see effects 'fade out' over time – that is, to get smaller the greater the duration after the end of the intervention that they are tested. Therefore, it is important to consider when an effect was observed when considering the impact of an intervention. A larger effect measured immediately after the intervention is not necessarily more meaningful or desirable than a smaller effect measured years after the end of the intervention: the latter is more sustainable, more difficult to achieve, and may be more important overall. Conversely, some interventions may have 'sleeping effects', where positive impacts are only seen much later.

For these six reasons outlined above, we recommend that you do not start considering interventions by directly comparing the size of their impact. It is important to define which outcomes you wish to improve, and for whom, and also to establish what is feasible to implement. Once you have narrowed down the set of interventions on this basis, then you can consider which have a track record of producing larger effects on the outcomes that you care about.



How should evidence ratings be interpreted and applied?

Each intervention on the Guidebook has been given an evidence rating. Foundations has assessed the strength of the evidence for each intervention on the Guidebook through a rigorous process, independently assessing the studies where interventions have been evaluated, and comparing them to internationally recognised standards of good evaluation. We have codified our standards, developing the following five evidence ratings to help commissioners understand how confident we are that the intervention works as described.

Level 4

This means that the intervention has evidence of working in more than one place and providing benefits to children lasting one year or longer. This does not mean that the intervention will provide benefits in all circumstances, however. An intervention which has been rated as a 4+ has even more evidence of working in multiple places, and the intervention has also been tested independently from the intervention developer. This shows that a positive effect has been achieved without the presence of the intervention developer – which is more similar to how an intervention may be implemented in your local area.

Level 3

This means that the intervention has evidence from a rigorous evaluation study of providing short-term benefits for children, often conducted under ideal conditions. This means that there is causal evidence for positive outcomes from the intervention, but further testing is required to determine whether its benefits last over time or can be replicated in differing contexts. A Level 3+ rating means that the intervention may also have demonstrated impact in multiple different contexts, but the other evaluations are not of high enough quality to show that the intervention is effective.

Level 2

This means that children receiving the intervention have shown improved outcomes, but we are not sure that the improvements are caused by the intervention. Commissioners should recognise that these interventions have potential but do not yet have evidence of impact. They offer the opportunity to innovate and to make use of a range of different approaches, but this must be based on a careful assessment of how an intervention fits with local circumstances, and a commitment to locally monitor, test, evaluate, and adapt. A Level 2+ rating means that the intervention has been tested more rigorously in a comparison group study, but we are still not sure that the improvement in child outcomes which were identified has been caused by the intervention.

NL2 (Not Level 2)

This means that the intervention has not yet been able to demonstrate improvements in child outcomes. This may be because the study has not been conducted rigorously, or because the intervention does not in fact work to improve outcomes for children. When an intervention has received an NL2, this means we cannot yet tell if the intervention is effective. Usually, interventions with this rating are at an early stage of development and important foundational work is under way. As with Level 2, such interventions need to be carefully monitored, tested and evaluated, to see whether they do offer improvements in the local area.



NE (No Effect)

This means that the intervention has evidence from a rigorous study (i.e. at the standard required for Level 3) and has not found a positive impact on child outcomes. This does not necessarily mean that the intervention should be decommissioned. However, it does highlight the need for careful monitoring to determine the extent to which the intervention is providing value for a local area.

Should I only commission interventions with evidence at Level 4?

There are several advantages to implementing interventions with established evidence.

Level 4 or 4+ interventions have evidence showing consistent benefits in multiple places with multiple populations. However, this is no guarantee that an intervention will provide these benefits again in a new setting or local authority, particularly if it is not delivered as intended. Established evidence does, however, increase the likelihood that it will work as described by the intervention provider.

Interventions with established evidence also tend to be more developed and more widely used, meaning that the original providers will have worked through many issues that could hamper effective implementation. Providers of well-evidenced interventions are more likely to be able to support local authorities to implement the intervention to maximise its effectiveness, for example through recruitment guidance or training materials.

However, you should never commission an intervention on the basis of its evidence rating only. Commissioning decisions should always be made with reference to the local and national context, the population you wish to support, and outcomes you are interested in.

Should I decommission interventions with evidence at Levels 2 or 3?

It would be unwise to automatically decommission an intervention based on disappointing study findings. Demonstrating impact is a journey: many well-evidenced interventions have had evaluation setbacks in the past and have used the lessons to strengthen their intervention model.

Commissioners have a responsibility to encourage and support ongoing evaluation of interventions they commission. This is especially true for interventions rated below Level 4: a less well-evidenced intervention may still be well suited to particular local needs and circumstances, and interventions with a lower rating can be an excellent source of innovation and experimentation. However, it is important that commissioners make a commitment to monitor, test, and adapt the interventions which they implement.

What does the Guidebook *not* do?

The Guidebook is not...

- **An endorsement for any specific intervention.** While we provide information about an intervention's effectiveness, this information should never be interpreted as validation, advisement, or recommendation. There are intense debates about what constitutes strong evidence of effectiveness. The Guidebook is supposed to act as a resource to help



commissioners navigate these debates by providing clear and unbiased information on factors which may be important for their decision-making.

- **A complete or exhaustive list.** There are thousands of interventions and approaches with various levels of evidence, and we cannot include all of them. As we conduct further assessment rounds we will continue to add more interventions to the Guidebook, as well as updating intervention ratings with the results of new evaluation studies.
- **A guarantee or silver bullet.** The interventions included on the Guidebook have some evidence of being effective. This evidence is not, however, a guarantee that the intervention will work in a specific location or setting. Many factors positively and negatively influence intervention outcomes. Interventions must therefore always be monitored within local settings to make sure that they are effective and provide value for money.
- **A set of simple answers.** Interventions should always be selected based on specific community needs and infrastructures. Commissioners should never commission an intervention solely on the basis of inclusion on the Guidebook. Local judgement is always required.
- **A list of short cuts or quick wins.** Implementing new interventions can be challenging even when they are manualised and clearly structured. Even interventions with clear implementation guidelines often require changes across local delivery systems and between agencies. Interventions may also need to be carefully adapted to the local context and target population. It often takes two or more years before an intervention or practice change will demonstrate positive results. Developing strong local evidence leadership is a crucial part of the picture when moving to an evidence-based approach.
- **A recommendation for using interventions 'off the shelf'.** The primary aim of this list is to provide examples of ideas that work and options for local authorities. It does not aim to inhibit innovation or prohibit practices with evidence of being effective at the local level. 'Home-grown' interventions can be effective and often share important features with interventions which appear on the Guidebook. Commissioners can use the information provided on the Guidebook and Foundations' Practice Guides to test and adapt their local practice with reference to what we know works.