

# How to Monitor and Evaluate



A learning summary from Comic Relief's  
Change Makers Programme



#3 in a series of key takeaways for practitioners & funders  
By Emma Pearson and John Williams



# CONTENTS

|                                                                       |           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>Introducing Change Makers</b>                                      | <b>3</b>  |
| NPC's role as a learning partner                                      | 4         |
| What this learning summary covers                                     | 4         |
| <b>1. The importance of careful planning</b>                          | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>2. Evaluating service delivery and systems change initiatives</b>  | <b>8</b>  |
| Key elements of service delivery MEL through a 'direct support' lens  | 9         |
| <b>Case Study: Power the Fight</b>                                    | 10        |
| Key elements of systems change MEL through an 'indirect support' lens | 11        |
| <b>Case Study: Kinship</b>                                            | 11        |
| <b>3. Overcoming common MEL challenges</b>                            | <b>13</b> |
| Challenge 1 – Not knowing what to collect and how                     | 14        |
| Key learnings for tackling this challenge                             | 14        |
| Challenge 2 – Low participation rates                                 | 15        |
| Key learnings for tackling this challenge                             | 16        |
| <b>Case Study: Young Change Makers</b>                                | 16        |
| Challenge 3 – Data quality difficulties                               | 17        |
| Key learnings for tackling this challenge                             | 17        |
| <b>Conclusion</b>                                                     | <b>18</b> |

# Introducing Change Makers

**Change Makers was a £9.1 million programme run by Comic Relief in the wake of the 2019 Coronavirus disease pandemic. It provided up to five years of targeted funding for 20 different partnerships, totalling 45 individual organisations.**

From 2020 onwards, the pandemic shifted the voluntary, community and social enterprise landscape. It has been estimated that charities lost up to £4 billion in income over a few short months at the start of the pandemic, and that a third of charities had decreased access to their volunteers. This direct impact on charities, combined with the general population's restricted ability to access support and need to socially isolate, had a disproportionately negative impact on some of society's more vulnerable populations, whose personal situations had been exacerbated by COVID-19 and their routes to support decreased due to the more unstable charity sector.

Change Makers sought to address some of these challenges and support organisations who work

to tackle some of the serious issues that saw increased strain and demand during the pandemic. This list included racial inequality, homelessness, early childhood development, forced migration, domestic abuse and mental health.

The long-term funding Comic Relief provided, as part of its 2018-2023 strategy, gave stability in an uncertain environment. It enabled individual organisations and partnerships to work at a systems change level, exploring the social and structural changes needed in the aftermath of COVID-19 to best support vulnerable populations who had been overlooked or under resourced at local, regional and national level.

Crucially, each of these grants sought to achieve change which would outlast the funding provided by Comic Relief.

## FUNDING THEMES

- 1 Gender Justice
- 2 Safe Place to be - Forced Migration
- 3 Safe Place to be - Homelessness
- 4 Children Survive and Thrive
- 5 Global Mental Health

## KEY STATISTICS

- 20 Partnerships funded
- 5 Years of funding
- 9.1 Million pound programme
- 45 Organisations

*Working with organisations across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.*

## NPC's role as a learning partner

NPC were engaged at the start of the Change Makers Programme as an evaluation and learning partner. As part of this work, we co-designed 5 learning questions with the Funded Partners, to frame their collective insights and takeaways.

### Learning summary series

#### 1. Building understanding

What do we need to understand about our organisation and the context it exists within before we can create meaningful change (e.g. influence policy and structural decisions) for a broad audience?

#### 2. How to collaborate

How can we create and maintain collaborations with individuals, charities, politicians, service providers and other stakeholders that are effective in creating the long-term change we are seeking?

#### 3. How to monitor and evaluate impact and attribute success

What does short and long-term change look like for our grant? How can we measure and present our achievements in robust, interesting and proportionate ways?

#### 4. How to communicate learning responsibly

How do we tell honest stories in accessible language and formats to our stakeholders whilst maintaining privacy and sensitivity? How can we develop a culture of data curiosity and acceptance of outcomes in a resource-stretched environment?

#### 5. How to centre lived experience

How do we develop and maintain positive relationships with all those with lived experience, including with project staff, service users and other stakeholders? How can we enable open communication within these relationships without putting pressure on them in the context of an ever-changing political landscape?

### What this learning summary covers

This is the third learning summary in our series and focuses on Funded Partner learnings on how to monitor and evaluate impact and attribute success. To answer our learning questions, NPC has grouped Funded Partner learnings under three headings:

- The importance of **careful planning**
- Differences between evaluating **service delivery and systems change initiatives**
- Overcoming **common evaluation challenges**

This piece will address each in turn, with key takeaways for practitioners and funders alike.

# 1.

## The importance of careful planning

Careful planning can help ensure monitoring and evaluation is:



### Focused

With clear outcomes and priorities, and avoiding trying to measure too much.

### Proportionate

By balancing rigour and feasibility without overburdening people.

### Adaptive

By iterating over time and improving through learning.

Evaluation is sometimes treated as an afterthought to delivery, with the focus on doing the minimum required to report to funders. On the Change Makers programme however, Funded Partners were supported to develop robust Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) approaches from the outset, including *measurement frameworks* grounded by *logic models* and *theories of change*.

We found early on our learning partnership that Funded Partners came to their Change Makers funding at different points on their learning journeys, with varying levels of internal MEL capability. Those with higher capabilities were often those adapting MEL plans from similar work they already run, and/or who are receiving support through an external evaluator, specialist learning partner, or MEL advisor. On the other hand, those with lower capabilities are usually less experienced in setting up structured measurement plans.

Devising MEL approaches was further complicated by the novelty of much Funded Partner delivery. This included organisations that were more accustomed to delivering 'direct' support approaches (i.e. those with direct access to service users) pivoting towards activities with an explicit systems change focus, such as lobbying decision-makers or influencing practice. These new delivery models therefore needed different MEL approaches, often for more diffuse or indirect outcomes that are harder to capture (discussed further in the section covering evaluating service delivery and systems change initiatives).

It was therefore important for us and Comic Relief to work with Funded Partners to carefully plan MEL approaches. This section presents five key findings from Funded Partner reflections on the importance of careful planning, and how it can support robust and proportionate MEL approaches that ultimately helped Funded Partners deliver against their social missions.

### **Planning is essential for making learning useful (not just for reporting)**

A consistent theme from discussions with Funded Partners early in their Change Makers delivery was the need to shift from viewing MEL primarily as a reporting requirement for funders to seeing it as a tool for organisational learning and improvement. Data collection as solely a reporting exercise can lead to MEL feeling tick-box and disconnected from day-to-day work, while careful planning can

ensure data is actively used to inform decisions and refine delivery approaches. MEL plans should explicitly address how data will be used and what decisions it will inform, which should then be communicated with relevant stakeholders. Without this clarity, MEL risks becoming an administrative exercise rather than a meaningful practice, which can be demotivating for both practitioners and participants alike.

*"We have some feedback suggesting that it was not too clear for some young people to see their contribution to the programme. Therefore, it was suggested that individual catch-up sessions where staff can update co-producers on what has been going on and how their suggestions are used and implemented might be helpful for future cohorts in order to keep them engaged and ensure that they feel valued."*

– Change Makers Funded Partner

### **Planning is critical for prioritising what matters (and avoiding overload)**

A consistent learning across Funded Partner reflections was that focusing on a smaller number of key MEL activities and refining them over time was more effective than trying to measure many different things simultaneously. Careful MEL planning helped teams identify the key elements to measure and direct their effort and resources toward what matters most, while avoiding the collection of unnecessary or duplicative data. This included drafting theories of change and logic models to map out how their activities would ideally lead to outcomes and then selecting the key elements to measure (e.g. key outcomes and underpinning assumptions). Without this prioritisation, MEL approaches can quickly become overloaded, unfocused, and difficult to sustain.

*"We have identified assumptions which we'll test through the programme, to know if what we are doing will help us achieve our vision... we have put in place new KPIs to help us test these hypotheses. At an activity level, we continually use a 'test and learn' approach in all areas of our implementation work. For example, we used user research and testing to refine and develop the programme for this year throughout."*

– Change Makers Funded Partner

### Planning supports coherence in complex or “whole system” work

Many Funded Partners were new to adopting an explicitly systems-focused approach. Some Funder Partners struggled to maintain coherence when teams and individuals were working across multiple components, making it difficult to understand how different delivery components contributed to overall systems change outcomes. Careful MEL planning helps to clarify theories of change by examining how different activities contribute to intended outcomes, which helps build a shared understanding across teams and partners. Without this big picture view, different workstreams can feel disconnected, and their overall impact becomes harder to articulate and assess.

*“One of the biggest challenges for the delivery team is for all its members to be able to visualise all the component parts of the project as one whole intervention. The ‘whole systems’ approach in practice requires members of the team working independently from each other but connected through the same overall objective... [We have] initiated more whole team events such as breakfast mornings, reflective spaces and away days to support the team in understanding how all aspects of the work are connected.”*

– Change Makers Funded Partner

### Good planning reduces burden and improves participation

A recurring theme amongst Funded Partner reflections was balancing generating robust evidence while avoiding excessive burden on participants. This is particularly evident in concerns about asking individuals – especially those in vulnerable situations, such as refugees and asylum seekers – to complete too many forms. Overburdening participants can lead to reduced engagement trends as MEL can feel extractive rather than meaningful. Careful MEL planning helps ensure that data collection is proportionate, accessible, and appropriate to participants’ contexts.

*“We’ve tried to get a balance between being able to understand and measure the impact and the change along the way, but not overburdened people with lots of forms...A lot of [refugees and asylum seekers] are in situations where they’re constantly being required to fill in forms and kind of account for themselves and we didn’t want people to feel like this is another bureaucratic thing.”*

– Change Makers Funded Partner

### Planning needs to be iterative – not fixed upfront

Funded partners often adapted the plans they had devised at the beginning of the programme, learning and refining their MEL approaches over time. This included adapting research plans, shifting focus in response to emerging evidence, and developing a clearer understanding of what the organisation is realistically well placed to collect. Careful planning should not be interpreted as rigid or fixed and instead be part of an ongoing learning cycle rather than a static framework.

*“We have changed some of our research activities due to the connections we have made with researchers and access to existing research which meets the intended need of these activities. Instead of duplicating work we have changed our plans for the focus groups, these will now be used to consult on the development of resources and training as the service develops. Similarly, our plans for the survey activity have changed focus from a general, national picture to a focus on local barriers and attitudes.”*

– Change Makers Funded Partner

## 2. Evaluating service delivery and systems change initiatives

While the distinction between 'direct' and 'indirect' support is an oversimplification to differentiate service delivery and systems change initiatives, it is a useful lens for designing MEL.

It highlights that:

Direct support tends towards **measurable, attributable, individual change**

Indirect support requires more **adaptive, theory-driven, and narrative-led approaches** to understanding contribution within complex systems

Across both, the strongest approaches are those that are:

- Grounded in a clear **theory of change** (including systems-oriented models)
- **Embedded within delivery** as continuous learning
- **Adapted to the realities** of participants and context



All of the Change Makers initiatives had some degree of systems change focus. However, many also had a 'service delivery' component. Change Makers work often sat somewhere across 'service delivery' and 'campaigning' (e.g. by providing support to individuals and influencing other practitioners to adopt similar models).

Separating 'direct' support (e.g. mental health counselling) from 'indirect' support (e.g. influencing decision-makers) oversimplifies the difference between service delivery and systems change efforts, it remains a helpful framework for designing MEL. This section presents findings from Change Makers on evaluating for 'direct' and 'indirect' support, including points of similarity and difference, and how to practically overcome the different challenges each approach presents.

## Key elements of service delivery MEL through a 'direct support' lens

### Spotlight on individual-level outcomes

In direct support contexts, measurement tended to focus on outcomes experienced by individuals, such as changes in wellbeing, knowledge, or behaviour. Funded Partners typically used structured tools, including Likert scales and needs assessments, and used baseline and follow-up scores to evidence change over time. As a result, many Funded Partners were able to generate credible and robust evidence at the individual level and noted that these approaches felt familiar and straightforward to implement. However, this can also reinforce a focus on shorter-term, individual change, which does not necessarily straightforwardly connect to wider or longer-term outcomes. This reinforces the earlier finding about the importance of careful planning and a strong theory of change that maps out how activities can lead to outcomes.

### Embedded feedback loops

Direct contact with service users enabled continuous and iterative feedback loops, rather than relying solely on periodic evaluation points. This included Funded Partners capturing immediate post-session reflections, ongoing one-to-one follow-ups, and regular reassessments over time, such as repeating baseline measures. In some cases, feedback was embedded directly into Funded Partner approaches through consultations and check-ins that happened during, rather than after, delivery. This created opportunities for rapid

adaptation and allowed practitioners to learn and respond in real time, rather than only at formal reporting stages (e.g. six-monthly reporting to Comic Relief). It was helpful for Funded Partners to integrate MEL into the delivery cycle, shifting away from retrospective evaluation points towards more continuous learning and response.

*"We operate an open-door policy and encourage feedback at every opportunity. After each event, one of our staff team call round each participant with lived experience to reflect on how the event was for them. This means we can effect change on a rolling basis. Besides 1-2-1 conversations, we will also hold focus groups, to offer opportunity for participants to hear others' feedback and respond to that. People may feel more confident offering constructive feedback in a group setting."*

– Change Makers Funded Partner

### Balancing the opportunity for depth and triangulation of data with complementarity

A defining feature of direct support is the close proximity to service users, which gave Funded Partners access to rich evidence. This typically included combining quantitative data (such as surveys, scales, and case tracking), qualitative insights (including interviews and case studies), practitioner observations and reflections, and ongoing participant feedback. This allowed Funded Partners to triangulate data sources – for example, using surveys, interviews, and focus groups to offer different ways for people to engage, and drawing on case studies to understand more holistic journeys. This creates significant opportunities for triangulating findings, but these benefits are only realised when methods are deliberately designed to complement one another. In practice, this means planning MEL approaches as a coherent system rather than a collection of tools and being clear about the role of each method to avoid collecting unnecessary or duplicative data and overburdening participants. It is therefore best to design MEL with a participant-first lens, and recognising that there are trade-offs between richness of insight and overburdening participants.

*"Our data collection will come in 3 main forms; survey, interview, and focus group. We have kept our methods simple to be able to capture the most data as possible as we*

*know historically our service users can be overwhelmed when asked to participate in too much feedback. By selecting these three devices to collect data, we are also allowing different pathways for people to have their voices heard and to participate in the avenue that is easiest for the individual."*

– Change Makers Funded Partner

### Using accessible, inclusive, and trauma-informed methods

Funded Partners sought to adapt standard MEL tools to the context and the needs of participants when collecting data directly from service users.

Examples included modifying clinical scales to remove sensitive or inappropriate questions, and offering multiple formats such as easy-read materials, opt-in interviews, or flexible engagement options. In some cases, participants were actively involved in shaping the MEL approach – for example, through design groups that helped define what data should be collected and how, or through feedback that directly informed service design and evolution. These reflections illustrate that effective MEL practice involves adapting methods to fit the context, and that prioritising accessibility and trust is essential.



### Power the Fight

Power the Fight is a charity which tackles violence affecting young people. They used their Change Makers funding for their Therapeutic Intervention for Peace (TIP) project, which combined therapeutic workshops with young people affected by youth violence with spaces for parents, carers and a supportive student alumni community.

Power the Fight is a charity which attempts to address violence affecting young people. They used their Change Makers funding for their Therapeutic Intervention for Peace (TIP) project, which takes a holistic approach to violence affecting young people, by delivering therapeutic workshops to

young people, whilst providing spaces for parents, carers and teaching staff to better understand these issues. The TIP project is evaluated by utilising evidence-based psychometrics, such as the [\*Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale\*](#) (WEMWBS) and YP Core to measure emotional wellbeing and distress.

*"The TIP project has been developing innovative and creative ways to complete traditional clinical measures such as the WEMWBS and SDQ scales...The practitioners are flexible and responsive to the moods and energy levels of the participants."*

## Key elements of systems change MEL through an 'indirect support' lens

### Building a robust vision for change

A consistent feature of indirect support is that outcomes are often diffuse, complex, and harder to define, with rarely a straightforward, linear pathway between activities and impact. For example, Funded Partners frequently reported difficulty identifying clear 'direct outcomes' when their delivery focused on influencing mindsets and behaviour. This highlights the importance of strong conceptual clarity before measurement can begin (e.g. having a robust theory of change). In practice, this means spending more time upfront defining what meaningful change looks like, and accepting that outcomes may be emergent and continue to evolve over time.

*"We also struggle sometimes with the complexity of proving our 'impact' in community-building work, as this has far fewer concrete 'outputs' or discrete 'outcomes' than a lot of project-based work... We are working together with other change-making third sector organisations via the Civic Power Fund to develop better evaluation or learning frameworks that demonstrate the necessary but often hard-to-capture impacts of work like community-building."*

– Change Makers Funded Partner

### Building a picture of long-term change through proxy and intermediate outcomes

A key challenge in indirect support is that meaningful change often unfolds over long time horizons, making it difficult to measure impact directly. Short-term indicators, such as post-event intentions or immediate feedback, can be weak proxies for long-term impact, as it can be difficult to link short-term changes to longer-term outcomes. As a result, indirect support relies heavily on tracking intermediate outcomes. Funded Partners typically focused on indicators such as awareness (e.g. policy or sector knowledge), behaviour change (such as the adoption of evidence or new practices), capacity (including skills and confidence), and engagement (such as relationships, reach, and participation). This included tracking policy engagement, measuring skills and confidence after training, or monitoring media reach and campaign visibility. This again highlights the importance of designing MEL around an adaptable theory of change – from activities to intermediate outcomes to system-level impact – combining short-term indicators with longer-term follow-up and being explicit about the time horizons over which change is expected to occur.

## Kinship

Kinship is the leading kinship care charity supporting family members and friends who step up to raise children when their parents cannot. They support kinship carers directly across England and Wales through one-to-one support, peer support groups and online chat, an expert advice line, an online information and support hub and free training workshops.

Kinship's Change Makers programme of work saw them empower and mobilise kinship carers to bring their daily reality and challenges they face to the attention of policy-makers to secure policy change. Their MEL activities had a dual approach – (1) gathering feedback and testimony of kinship carers to understand the extent to which they have been empowered to drive change, and (2) capturing a range of indicators on the impact of campaigning activities. This included monitoring government announcements, mentions and/or supportive statements in parliament, engagement with MPs, and using a media monitoring service to track, and record reach and coverage both in traditional and social media.



### **Focusing on the contribution you make**

For indirect support approaches, attribution is typically weak because organisations are working through others – such as local authorities, fellow practitioners, or policymakers – and operating within complex systems shaped by multiple influences. This makes it difficult to isolate the effect of a single intervention or to claim direct causality for observed outcomes. In practice, MEL requires a shift in how impact is understood from asking “did we cause this change?” to “how, if at all, did we contribute to change?” This means adopting contribution-based approaches, which can include triangulating sources of evidence and gathering diverse perspectives on how activities contribute to impact (e.g. combining dissemination metrics with stakeholder feedback on outputs), and being cautious about over-claiming the impact of any one activity or intervention in complex systems.

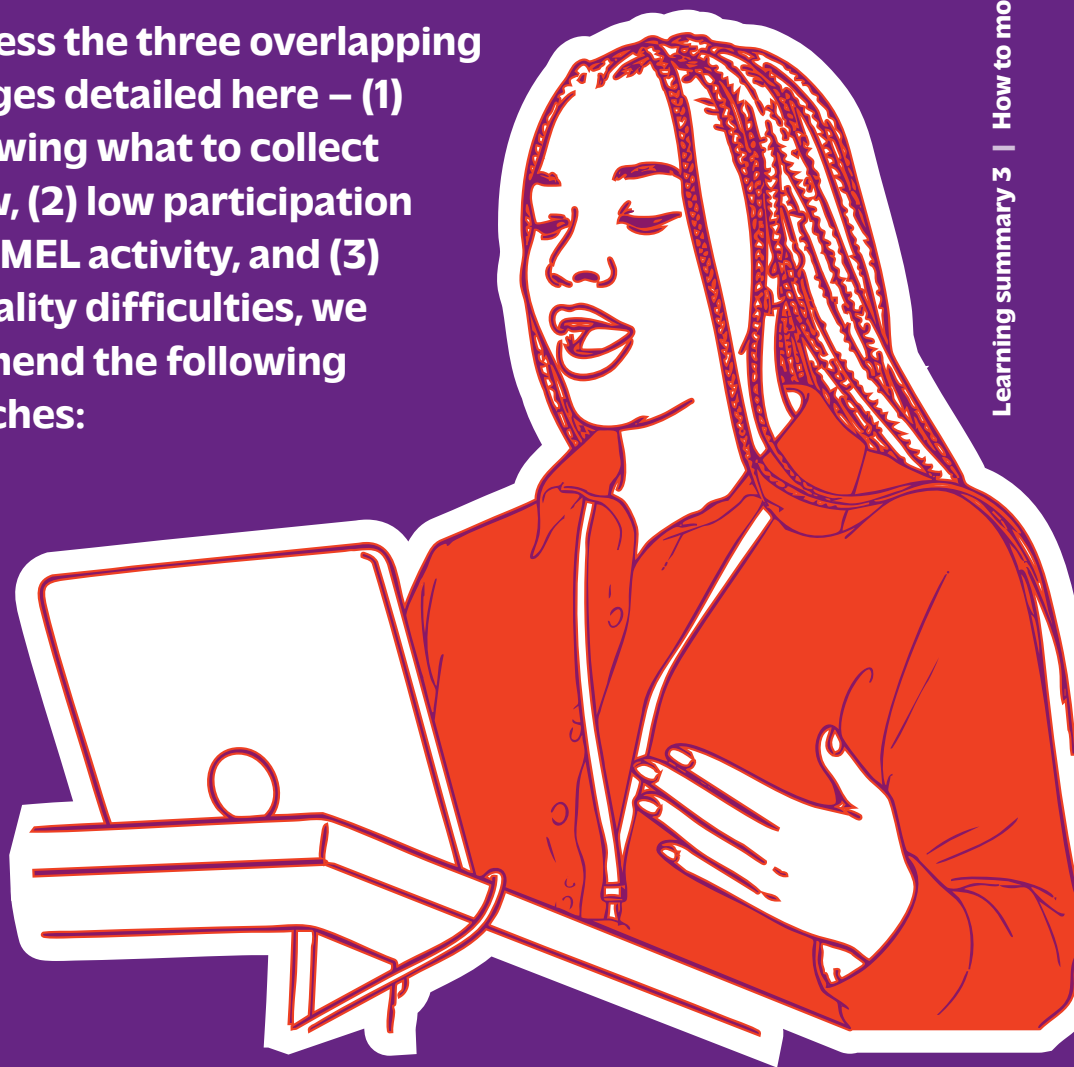
### **Innovation, adaptability and a focus on stories of change**

Because indirect support often operates beyond the boundaries of common MEL approaches, especially for organisations more accustomed to delivering direct support interventions, Funded Partners frequently needed to innovate in how they designed and implemented measurement. This involved developing new indicators, building bespoke frameworks, and testing assumptions more explicitly. Further, the diffuse and emergent nature of change means that quantification alone is rarely sufficient. As a result, qualitative evidence played a central role, with Funded Partners relying heavily on case studies, testimonials, and narrative accounts to capture how change happened in practice, and providing credible evidence where measurement is complex or incomplete. In practice, this meant investing in the systemic collection of strong and credible stories of change, and triangulating these with carefully selected quantitative signals to build a more complete and compelling account of change.

# 3.

## Overcoming common MEL challenges

To address the three overlapping challenges detailed here – (1) not knowing what to collect and how, (2) low participation rates in MEL activity, and (3) data quality difficulties, we recommend the following approaches:



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### **Starting with what you need to learn, not what you need to measure**

Focus on a small number of priority learning questions linked to real decisions. This helps ensure data collection is practical, purposeful, and grounded in delivery.

### **Designing MEL to fit people and delivery, not the other way around**

Participation improves when MEL is embedded into delivery, builds trust

over time, and feels meaningful to those involved. Keep methods simple, reduce burden, and co-design where possible.

### **Aiming for credible insights, not perfect data**

In systems change, data will always be partial and messy. Prioritise triangulating multiple sources and building a credible picture of contribution, rather than proving linear impact or collecting everything that might be useful.

When looking across Funded Partner reflections on data collection, three persistent challenges emerged – (1) not knowing what to collect and how, (2) low participation rates in MEL activity (e.g. surveys with few responses), and (3) data quality difficulties (e.g. patchy and/or inconsistent datasets). These challenges were typically overlapping in how they were experienced by Funded Partners – for example, low participation in MEL activity would often lead to issues with data quality. This section explores each of these challenges in turn, with practical recommendations for overcoming, or at least mitigating, the difficulties encountered.

### Challenge 1 – Not knowing what to collect and how

A key issue is that MEL is often experienced by practitioners and participants alike as abstract and external to day-to-day delivery. Clearly articulating the change people want to see is an important first step, but it can still be difficult to convert this into a practical MEL approach, with frameworks sometimes feeling theoretical rather than grounded in the realities of delivery. As a result, there is often a gap between intention (what change we want to measure) and operationalisation (what we actually track in practice).

This challenge is compounded by the complexity of systems change work, which can make measurement feel overwhelming. Funded Partners aiming at systems change were typically working in contexts where cause-and-effect relationships were unclear, with change being non-linear and fluctuating over time. In addition, Funded Partner delivery often involved multiple stakeholders and systems, with each producing different data. In this context, it can be difficult to determine what counts as meaningful or observable progress, often leading to overload by attempting measure to everything, or disengagement from measurement altogether.

Capacity constraints further shape how this challenge plays out in practice. Some Funded Partners developed overly ambitious measurement plans towards the beginning of Change Makers funding, typically by trying to implement too many methods at once. This often resulted in patchy or inconsistent data collection, making it difficult to generate meaningful learning.

*“A continuing challenge for this project is the broad remit of the work and the challenges in evaluating and demonstrating positive change and outcomes... Capacity is an issue given the variety of activities we'd like to deliver, especially to do meaningful community engagement work over such a large area and broad target audience.”*

– Change Makers Funded Partner

Finally, Funded Partners highlighted a lack of concrete, practical examples of MEL approaches as a significant barrier, especially in a systems change context. Participants repeatedly highlighted the need to see completed examples of MEL in practice, including the specific tools used, the insights generated, and the level of effort involved.

### Key learnings for tackling this challenge

#### Focus on ‘learning’ broader than simply ‘reporting’

Instead of asking ‘what should we measure?’, it can be better to ask, ‘what do we need to learn to improve our delivery?’ This shift in focus helps anchor MEL in practical value for achieving progress against the social mission at heart of programmes. In practice, this means identifying a small number of priorities and then working backwards to determine what data is needed, ensuring that each data point is clearly linked to a decision or action. This naturally leads to a practical shift towards building in regular reflection moments throughout delivery, rather than concentrating activity at the point of end-of-grant reporting, and framing data collection as a tool for continuous improvement and adaptation.

#### Be realistic about what can be measured in complex systems

As discussed previously, not all outcomes will be visible in the short term, and it is often more appropriate to focus on contribution rather than attribution. In practice, this means combining short and medium-term indicators with longer-term follow-up, and being explicit about uncertainty, rather than attempting to eliminate it. This includes prioritising depth over breadth and avoiding collecting fragmented and low-quality data by trying to collect too much. A more effective approach is to focus on a small number of core things to measure and collecting high-quality data consistently over time.

## Seek out examples of previous MEL approaches

A third learning highlights the importance of having concrete MEL examples to hand, with abstract guidance or principles alone insufficient to build confidence and capability. Funded Partners benefited from access to worked examples, including specific indicators, data collection tools, and practical resources such as spreadsheets or templates. Case-based and peer learning – showing what was tried, what worked, and what did not – was particularly powerful, especially when accompanied by transparency about the time, roles, and trade-offs involved.

## Challenge 2 – Low participation rates

Funded Partners frequently struggled with low participation rates in MEL activity – often experienced as “people are not filling in our surveys and/or sending us their data.” This is a common MEL challenge and often relates to how evaluation activity is experienced by participants and practitioners alike, beyond a simple issue of motivation. It reflects a combination of factors, including value (whether participation feels meaningful), trust (whether it feels safe or comfortable to participate) and system-level constraints (whether partners are able and willing to engage).

## Value and accessibility issues

MEL can sometimes feel extractive or burdensome. Many of the people Funded Partners were working with – such as young people, teachers, or community members – were already required to complete forms and provide information in different areas of their lives. Practitioners themselves are also operating under capacity constraints and delivery pressures. In this context, participation in evaluation may be deprioritised in favour of more immediate or pressing activities. For some service users, additional barriers such as language, confidence in writing, or prior experiences of scrutiny can further reduce participation. This highlights an important dynamic – low participation is often a response to how MEL feels in practice, rather than simply how it is technically designed.

## Trust issues

Relationships and trust play a critical role in shaping participation, particularly in sensitive contexts. Individuals may be hesitant to share information, especially in the early stages, and concerns about confidentiality or over-sharing can reduce willingness to participate. This reinforces the idea that participation depends on relationships and trust, beyond simply access to tools.

*“We also face challenges around data collection, particularly from new participants, as clients from our community are often unwilling to disclose demographic information (e.g. disability) until trust is established.”*

– Change Makers Funded Partner

## System-level constraints

Participation challenges also extend beyond service users to the wider system. Funded Partners frequently reported difficulties obtaining data from partners, despite repeated requests. Factors such as turnover, limited capacity, and competing priorities all affected engagement. These findings suggest that participation is often not only an individual issue, but also a systemic one.

*“Despite repeated requests to the schools, useable behaviour data for students participating in the workshops was not provided, resulting in a very limited dataset... In future, [we] will establish agreements with school senior leadership teams to ensure access to this data and enhance reporting on impact in this area.”*

– Change Makers Funded Partner

## Key learnings for tackling this challenge

### Embedding data collection into delivery

Participation tended to be higher when MEL was integrated as part of core delivery, rather than treating it as an additional activity. In practice, this involved collecting feedback during sessions rather than afterwards, or using conversational, group-based approaches instead of standalone surveys. Key to this process of embedding MEL was taking the time to prioritise trust-building as part of MEL design. Participants may not be ready or willing to share information immediately, particularly in sensitive contexts. As a result, it can be helpful to use phased approaches to data collection, starting with light-touch engagement and gradually moving to deeper methods, as well as being transparent about how data will

be used and offering options for different levels of disclosure can also support participation.

### Design MEL as a participatory and reciprocal process

Instead of focusing on collecting data from participants, delivery organisations can create value with them. Co-designing MEL approaches can help ensure MEL is an engaging process centring participation and accountability, with Funded Partners reporting that participation improved when approaches were developed collaboratively with those involved. In practice, this included involving participants in shaping questions and formats, testing methods with small groups before scaling up, sharing back insights regularly, in an effort to make participation feel meaningful and connected to visible change.



### Young Change Makers

*UK Youth in partnership with The Diana Award and Centre for Mental Health*

Young Changemakers is a programme led by and for young people from Black and Black-mixed heritage communities to reimagine mental health support and services. As part of the initiative, young people were recruited as peer researchers, engaging them in various research projects designed to enhance their skills.

As a result, a [\*guide to peer research\*](#) was produced to both showcase the benefits of involving young people in peer research,

and to offer practical guidance on how to do so effectively. Some of the potential challenges highlighted in the guide included limited capacity and availability of young people due to other commitments; short timescales, as building relationships and trust takes time; and confidentiality, safeguarding, and ethical concerns, especially when dealing with sensitive or potentially triggering topics. The guide recommended addressing these challenges through a combination of flexible planning, realistic timelines, and meaningful coproduction.

## Proactively manage participation from partners and stakeholders

Because participation challenges are often systemic, organisations can benefit from setting clear expectations early, aligning data collection with existing processes, and investing in relationships rather than relying on repeated data requests. This involves reducing friction as much as possible, as every additional step in a process can reduce participation. In practice, this meant simplifying tools and processes and removing unnecessary data points.

## Challenge 3 – Data quality difficulties

Issues with data quality were rooted in the nature of the work undertaken on Change Makers grants. Many of the Funded Partners were working in contexts where outcomes were diffuse, indirect, and often only visible over the long term. In these contexts, there is rarely a linear pathway between actions and outcomes, which makes it difficult to capture impact.

### Inconsistency in data

Data is often inconsistent or missing across systems. Funded Partners frequently encountered challenges with partners not providing data, or with data being held in different formats that cannot easily be combined. In addition, there may be limited secondary data available to validate or contextualise findings, especially for those trialling novel approaches. This often leads to relying on fragmented data, which can limit the robustness of conclusions.

### Unreliability of baseline and comparison data

A further challenge was the difficulty of establishing reliable baselines and comparison points. In real-world delivery contexts, conditions are constantly shifting – communities evolve, external factors such as COVID-19 can rapidly change circumstances, and participants may not have a clear frame of reference at the outset. As a result, baseline data can be weak or unstable, making it harder to interpret change over time with confidence.

*“There is little secondary data to check against or replace uncertainties in our own data. For example, there is no available data exploring differences that could be related to ethnicity or country of origin across our cohort... we could not always disaggregate and*

*understand differences and patterns between women’s needs and public service demand. Our methodology limitations prohibited us from exploring ‘why’ women interfaced with services in certain ways.”*

– Change Makers Funded Partner

### Nonlinear nature of change

Finally, there is often a mismatch between how change happens and how it is measured. Real world change is often non-linear – for example, confidence may increase, decrease, and then increase again over time. However, many measurement tools are best able to capture steady, linear changes. This can result in situations where high-quality data appears to show little progress or even decline, simply because it is being interpreted through an inappropriate model.

*“We are using pre and post training questionnaires with scaling questions. However, we have noticed some participants scaling themselves highly before the training, so there is no change at the end, this has led us to consider whether this is the best way to measure impact.”*

– Change Makers Funded Partner

## Key learnings for tackling this challenge

### Define what ‘good data’ looks like in the context of systems change

Rather than prioritising precision, standardisation, and short-term attribution, practitioners may need to focus on building credible accounts of change. This typically involves triangulating multiple sources of evidence, combining qualitative and quantitative data, and looking for signals of contribution rather than definitive proof of causation.

### Set realistic expectations around evidence

Not all outcomes will be observable in the short term, and not all impacts can be meaningfully quantified. Being explicit about these limitations can help reduce pressure to produce misleading, over-simplified, or over-claimed data, and supports more honest and useful learning.

## 5 key takeaways for practitioners

**Start with learning priorities:** Focus MEL on a small number of key questions linked to decision-making, rather than external reporting.

**Design for people and context:** Use flexible, accessible, and trauma-informed approaches, co-designed where possible, to reduce burden and increase buy-in.

**Focus on contribution, not attribution:** In complex systems, use triangulation across data sources to show how your work contributes to change rather than claiming causality.

**Work pragmatically with imperfect data:** Prioritise consistently gathering a small number of key datapoints – and triangulate across multiple partial sources.

**Plan carefully but stay adaptive:** Treat MEL as iterative – continuously test, refine, and adjust approaches over time.

Across the varied delivery models on the Change Makers programme, short- and long-term change was typically interconnected and non-linear, with early individual improvements in knowledge or behaviour as important foundations for wider changes. While direct delivery typically enabled a clearer attribution of individual outcomes, the messy realities of system-focused work required a broader understanding of contribution, with change often diffuse and visible over time.

To measure and present achievements in ways that are robust, interesting, and proportionate, Funded Partners demonstrated the value of starting with clear learning priorities, designing MEL as an integrated part of delivery, and focusing on credible insights rather than perfect data. Effective approaches combined carefully selected quantitative indicators with rich qualitative evidence to illustrate how change happened in practice. Taken together, these findings reinforce that strong MEL is not defined by complexity or volume of data, but by clarity of purpose, adaptability, and the ability to tell a coherent and honest story about change in complex systems.



New Philanthropy Capital is a think tank and consultancy working with individuals and organisations to maximise their impact. For over 25 years, we've worked with hundreds of organisations and individuals who want to turn ambition into impact, from shaping strategy, to supporting delivery, to evaluating what's working and learning what to do next. If you'd like to find out more about our work, please contact us at:

info@thinkNPC.org or visit [www.thinkNPC.org](http://www.thinkNPC.org)