Giving Evidence
Enabling giving based on sound evidence

PRESS RELEASE: FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

New Research Released Into The Need For More Research About Charities and Giving

2nd July 2019

Charity Futures and Giving Evidence today launch two related studies which assess whether and where more research is needed about UK charities and giving.

1. **Demand**: This asked UK charities and donors (of all types) what they want more research about. It was an open consultation process run over 15 months, through focus groups, surveys and a workshop, which invited any charity or donor to suggest questions for research, and then invited any charity or donor to vote to prioritise the list. It resulted in a prioritised list of 24 questions (listed below). It adapted a method developed in medical / health for consulting with patients and their carers about their priorities for medical research.
2. **Supply**: This investigated what research already exists about UK charities and philanthropy; what topics it does and does not cover, and what methods it uses. It used systematic review methods, and was led by The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI Centre) at University College London, precisely because they are experts in systematic reviews but are outside the charity / philanthropy sectors. {We are launching a 'review version' of this study, to invite comments from relevant academics.}

Combined, the two sets of results form a 'gap analysis' and show major areas where more research would be valued by charities and donors, who are among its intended users. The studies can inform the work of the proposed Oxford Institute of Charity, which Charity Futures recently announced, as well as wider academic activity around charity and philanthropy. There were some surprises in terms of questions that didn't arise.

The biggest finding was probably how disengaged charities and donors are from academic research. Half of our survey respondents said that they use academic journal articles 'never' or 'hardly ever', and we heard many views such as *"I find that most of the research is very academic and doesn't reflect the reality of charities". "It [academic literature] is cleverly written and that language is putting me off right away".*

Findings of the demand study

Impact dominates the list. The top 24 questions are dominated by questions about how to measure impact (i.e., research methods), use impact measurement data to improve effectiveness, and communicate better about impact with external audiences, notably funders. Impact accounts for all of the top seven questions; eight of the top 10 questions; and 14 of the top 24. We disallowed questions about fundraising - simply because researchers have not overlooked them.

A priority question was '*Which interventions are most effective (or least effective) and why, within a charity sector (i.e., for a specific problem, or specific context)?'*

There was also interest in the effectiveness of funders: e.g., "*How do grant-makers currently assess their effectiveness? What ways of giving can improve grant effectiveness?*" and *"How effective are the approaches used by funders to monitor and evaluate charities?"*

Beneficiaries feature directly in three questions. One might have expected more.

There were some ***requests for things that already exist***, such as specific evaluations of specific organisations, and for methods to identify the impact of interventions in people's complex lives.

Surprising omissions included anything directly about:

- HR management: recruitment, structuring compensation, retention, managing performance. Neither relating to staff, volunteers or trustees.
- Finance: nothing related to (for example) whether and when to take on debt or how to manage it, managing allocation of risk in contracts, nothing about social impact bonds, calculating the full cost of work, negotiating contracts, whether / when to walk away from contracts (e.g., if the funding is inadequate). This omission is particularly remarkable given how many charities are involved in commissioning processes, which involve determining prices for services and negotiating contracts.
- Ethics of research, e.g., around human subjects. This is surprising in view of requirements of the new GDPR, and that most charities' monitoring and evaluation is research on people.
- Understanding the location, nature and cause of need.
- Environmental issues.
- Influencing policy.

Surprisingly few questions concerned running the charity / internal issues: most of the list is about communicating with outsiders, notably funders. Governance only occupied two questions of the

There was nothing about whether / when to collaborate. Collaboration is on the list of 24 questions only (i) about what aids and hinders it (which is a good question, but not about whether to do it) and (ii) about collaborating to demonstrate impact.

Supply

We looked at (1) all academic journals globally for studies published since 2006 which contain data about UK charities or philanthropy (date chosen to coincide with the Charities Act of 2006); and (2) the research produced by various UK academic centres specialising in charity / philanthropy[i] since 2006.

Unsurprisingly, the literature is small: we found 184 relevant studies in total. That includes 109 journal articles, and 83 academic studies produced by the UK academic centres, plus some 'grey literature'.

We found that most studies look at issues peculiar to the charity sector, such as volunteering and fundraising. Few looked at the broader literature (e.g., around management, economics, diversity, behavioural insights) and how it could be applied to charities or giving.

The largest clusters were around:

- ***What works and why*** (37 studies). They mainly addressed donor behaviour (28 studies) e.g., mechanisms of charitable giving; fundraising activity (13) e.g., different fundraising activities such as direct mailing. Governance studies (9) investigated, for instance, the impact of government contracts. Communications (9) included studies that assessed marketing strategies.
- ***Donor behaviour*** (28 studies), funding and income (19 studies) and fundraising (13 studies).

- ***Distribution / scope of charity and philanthropic activities*** (12 studies).

There were some surprising gaps, and some gaps relative to the demand that we found:

- We found few studies about **impact measurement** methods or involving beneficiaries (either potential or actual beneficiaries).
- We found no studies of 'societal outcomes', e.g., whether / when / how charities' **campaigning and lobbying** efforts succeed. This is a surprise given their historical importance and the fights for charities to retain the ability to campaign and lobby.
- Given the interest in the literature about **effectiveness** ('what works and why'), we were surprised to find only seven randomised controlled trials (the 'gold standard' for a single study to establish the effect of something), none of which was produced by a UK specialist centre. We found only seven systematic reviews, which are the best way to use all the existing studies to answer a question such as 'what works?'.

The 'review copies' of both studies are available at www.giving-evidence.com/consultation

Sir Stephen Bubb, Founder and Director of Charity Futures, said: "Charity Futures was keen to fund these major studies to investigate just what the charity sector wants from research and how much current research there is. It confirms our suspicion that there was a paucity of in-depth research in our universities about charities and philanthropy. That needs correcting if we are to increase charities' and donors' effectiveness. That is exactly why we are establishing the Oxford Institute of Charity, which will carry out research of the highest academic standard and which is targeted and geared to the search for more sustainable charity."

Caroline Fiennes, Director of Giving Evidence, said: "We were surprised by how uninterested charities and donors seemed to be in academic research. We were also stuck by the mismatch between the topics that they said they were interested in and the focus of the existing research. Clearly the voice of the intended beneficiary is not the sole determinant of a research agenda, but it is an important component.

This kind of consultation arose in medical research where, for years, doctors and researchers assumed that they knew what was most important. They thus missed many issues that are crucial to patients. It sounds obvious to ask patients, but a process for consulting them needed inventing. This is the first time that that consultation process has been used outside of medical /health research. It probably can be applied in many areas in which charities and donors operate, because often there isn't enough research, and that immediately raises the question of which topics to prioritise.

The research also points to some activities that would be valuable beyond producing more research. One is helping charities and donors to find and use existing research – for example, about the effectiveness of various interventions, which they can use to design programmes. And another is training charities and donors about research methods e.g., for identifying impact, because there were several requests for research methods which in fact already exist."

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The questions that emerged as top priority

Rank	Question
1	What are the best ways for charities to evaluate long-term outcomes?
Joint 2	How can the less tangible impacts of charities be measured for work where outcomes are hard to quantify?
Joint 2	How can evaluation enable charities to improve what they do, rather than prove they are making a difference?
4	How can qualitative data (e.g., personal stories, case studies) be used to demonstrate impact?
Joint 5	How do grant-makers currently assess their effectiveness? What ways of giving can improve grant effectiveness?
Joint 5	How can impact be captured in a way that is meaningful to intended beneficiaries and other stakeholders?
7	How can impact be measured in a standard way for all charities?
Joint 8	What are the most effective models for charities to generate non-grant revenue to become financially self-sustaining?
Joint 8	What is the value of the charity sector in comparison to the business sector? What are its strengths and unique contributions?
Joint 10	How can charities better communicate the impact of their work to donors, beneficiaries and staff?
Joint 10	What makes for good leadership in the charity sector and does this differ from good leadership in other sectors? How does this vary across different sized organisations?
Joint 12	How well are charities working with their intended beneficiaries to influence the charity's work?
Joint 12	How can capacity to conduct research be increased in the charity sector to improve their understanding of need and to support robust evaluation of their work?
Joint 14	Does the traditional model of governance in charities still work? What new approaches might deliver greater benefits for intended beneficiaries?
Joint 14	How can charities working on the same issue collaborate to demonstrate the benefit of their combined work?
Joint 14	How do charities undertake research, monitoring and evaluation? (i.e., the actual practice and detail)
Joint 17	How effective are the approaches used by funders to monitor and evaluate charities?
Joint 17	How can charities improve their communication of how their money has been spent?
Joint 17	What aids and hinders collaborations between charities and business?
Joint 17	Which interventions are most effective (or least effective) and why, within a charity sector (i.e., for a specific problem, or specific context)?
Joint 21	What are the barriers and enablers to ensure diversity amongst trustees?
Joint 21	What impact has austerity had on the charity sector?
Joint 23	How can the management of small charities be improved e.g., through outsourcing or sharing back-office functions?
Joint 23	How can evidence about effectiveness guide donors to support the most effective work?

Notes for editors

- Both studies were funded by Charity Futures, and designed and led by Giving Evidence
- Both studies were conducted as formal pieces of research in their own right, for example, with a protocol describing the proposed steps published before / early during the process.
- The 'demand' consultation adapted the method developed by the James Lind Alliance, which has run priority setting projects for over 50 medical conditions. The project involved five workshops around the UK and two rounds of open surveys plus a workshop in Manchester. It was overseen by an Advisory Group comprising charities, funders, and representatives from across the sector. The full report and detail including the protocol are at: www.giving-evidence.com/consultation
- More detail about the 'supply' study, including the full report, is at: www.giving-evidence.com/supply

Charity Futures, a think-tank promoting the long-term sustainability of charities and good leadership and governance. To this end, Charity Futures intends to establish an Institute of Charity in Oxford University, which was announced this in May 2019. More information is at www.oxfordinstituteofcharity.org Twitter: @Charity_Futures

Giving Evidence is a consultancy and campaign to make charitable activity more effective by encouraging and enabling charitable *giving* based on sound *evidence*. It helps donors and charities in many countries to be more effective understand their impact and to raise it. Through campaigning, thought-leadership and meta-research, we show what evidence is available and what remains needed, what it says, and where the quality and infrastructure of evidence need improving. Giving Evidence was founded by Caroline Fiennes, a former award-winning charity CEO, and author of *It Ain't What You Give*. Caroline speaks and writes extensively about these issues, e.g., at sector events and in the press, including in the scientific journal *Nature* and in the *Financial Times*. She is on boards of The Cochrane Collaboration, The Life You Can Save and the Flemish Red Cross. Twitter: @carolinefiennes

The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) is part of the Social Science Research Unit (SSRU), UCL Institute of Education, University College London.

The EPPI-Centre was established in 1993 to address the need for a systematic approach to the organisation and review of evidence-based work on social interventions. The work and publications of the Centre engage health and education policy makers, practitioners and service users in discussions about how researchers can make their work more relevant and how to use research findings.

Founded in 1990, the Social Science Research Unit (SSRU) is based at the UCL Institute of Education, University College London. Its mission is to engage in and otherwise promote rigorous, ethical and participative social research as well as to support evidence-informed public policy and practice across a range of domains including education, health and welfare, guided by a concern for human rights, social justice and the development of human potential. Twitter: @EPPICentre

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[i] We looked at the academic centres specialising in charity / philanthropy at the following universities: St Andrews, Birmingham, Plymouth, Southampton, Sheffield Hallam, the Open University, Newcastle, Kent, Cass / CGAP, and the Marshall Institute at LSE.