

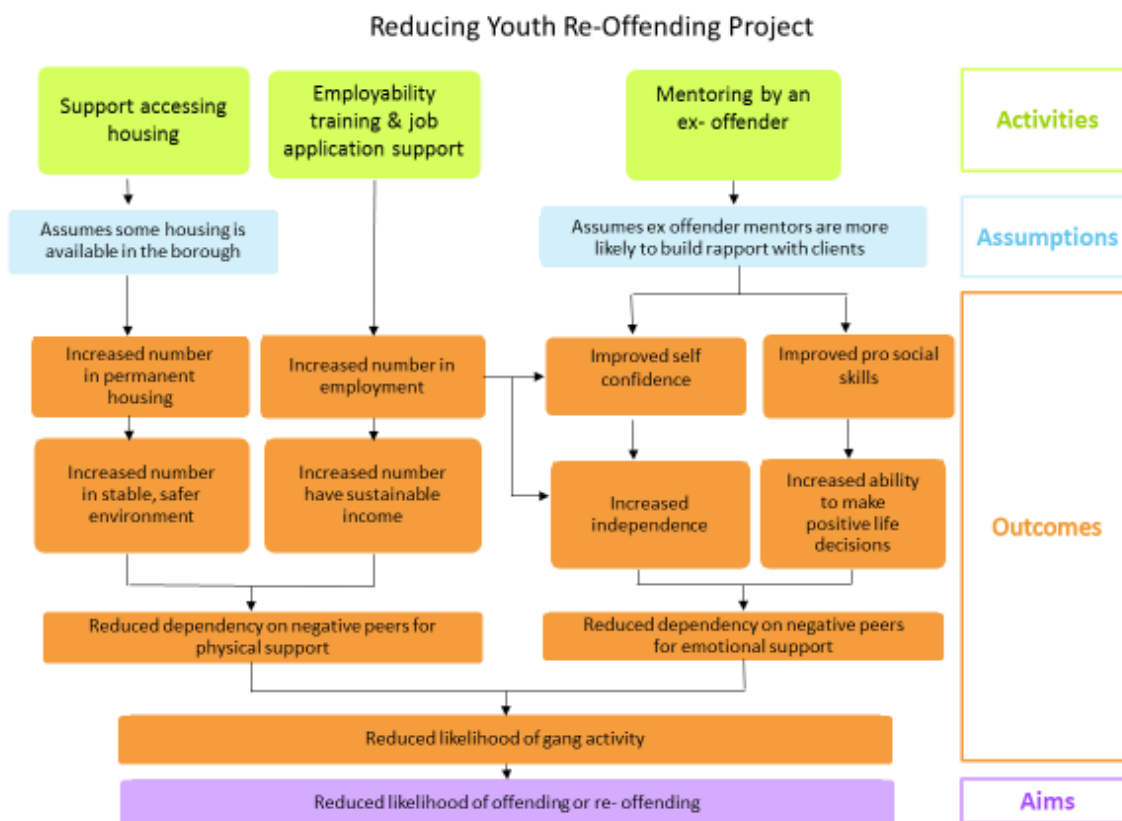
Developing a Theory of Change for your project

What is a Theory of Change?

A Theory of Change is a diagram that explains how your project has an impact on young people. It is a practical model that allows you to articulate HOW you will achieve your aim, and what assumptions you are making.

A Theory of Change should effectively describe and explain the impact of the project from a beneficiary's point of view. Subsequent iterations may include scale and operational details.

Example Theory of Change



Why are Theories of Change useful?

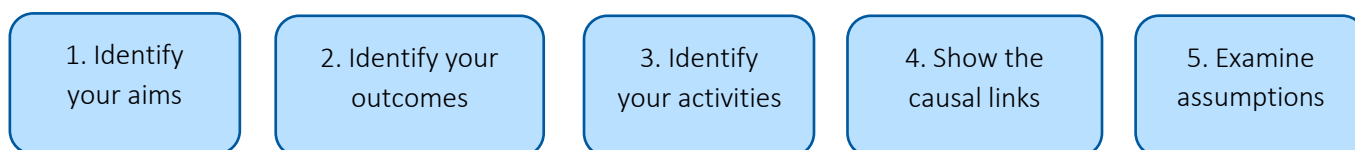
Theories of Change are useful for:

- Internal programme development: the process of developing a Theory of Change can help you to refine and enhance the effectiveness of your project.
- External communication: a Theory of Change diagram can be a useful tool for communicating what your programme does and how it has an impact in a clear and convincing way.
- Evaluation planning: it is a first step in designing an effective evaluation, as it allows you to identify which outcomes are key to your model's success and can indicate which ones should be the focus of your evaluation efforts.

Project Oracle believes that a Theory of Change, which provides a clear, concise and convincing explanation of what your project does, what impact you aim to have and how you believe you will achieve it, is a vital foundation of any project, and a prerequisite for effective evaluation. For this reason, producing a Theory of Change is an obligatory requirement for achieving Standard 1 of Project Oracle's Standards of Evidence.

How do I create a Theory of Change?

There are five steps in creating a Theory of Change for your project:



This document will describe each of these five elements in turn, framing them with examples from a fictional programme aimed at reducing youth re-offending. The full Theory of Change diagram for this project can be found on page 1.

At the end of the end of the document you will find a checklist of questions to ask yourself before finalising or submitting your own Theory of Change. Below are some practical tips on getting started:

- You can use a variety of widely available software to draw your Theory of Change, e.g. MS PowerPoint, MS Excel or MS Word, and downloadable templates.
- We recommend that in the first instance you construct your Theory of Change using a big piece of paper and post-it notes. Experiment with moving things around until your diagram is accurate and clear.
- Don't do it alone: ideally you should create the Theory of Change together with other staff members, young people who have taken part in the project and other stakeholders.
- Colour code your Theory of Change and include a key that identifies its different elements (i.e. aims, outcomes, activities and assumptions).
- Keep it simple: it should be understandable by a non-expert, so avoid too many acronyms, or explain them.
- Share and submit as an image or PDF: don't risk sending a diagram that will load differently on different machines.

Step 1: Identifying your aim(s)

Definition: the overarching purpose of your project; what you hope to achieve with your activities.

Tips

- The aim of your project is its long-term outcome, so remember to state what you're aiming to achieve, not what the activities are.
- The aim should be measurable.
- In general your project should have one overall aim. However, there may be more than one aim if your project works with multiple target groups – for example a project which works with young parents and their children may have an aim for each of these groups.

Example

Young people who have been involved in the criminal justice system often find it difficult to move away from this lifestyle – illustrated by high reoffending rates. This project wishes to address this – their aim is to reduce re-offending rates amongst young people who have already been involved in the criminal justice system.

Step 2: Identifying your outcomes

Definition: the changes, benefits, learning or other effects that happen as a result of your project.

Tips

- Think about what changes (outcomes) must happen before your aim can be realised. This can be a confusing stage. You might be inclined to focus on what you must do to make the changes happen. Try not to start your brainstormed ideas with actions performed by your project. Instead, think about all of the things that must be in place in order for the aim to be achieved. Thinking about the root causes of problems can be helpful to identify some of the changes (outcomes) you want to see.
- Outcomes can be immediate, intermediate or longer term. It is likely that you will have a number of outcomes along a chain to get to your final aim. You will need to ensure you get the sequence right, both in terms of the logic (is one outcome a pre-condition for another?), and your activities (are your activities in the right order to meet this pre-condition?).
- Outcomes should be specific and measurable, typically using language such as 'greater', 'improved' or 'increased'. They should be phrased as if they have been achieved already.
- They should be comprehensive enough to reflect the complexity of the programme – the aim is to explain in detail all the changes that happen to beneficiaries during the programme.

Example

There are many reasons why young people re-offend, but this project specifically focusses on the fact that young people can find it difficult to move away from gangs and negative peer groups, as these are the people they rely on. Therefore, the key outcomes for this project are reduced reliance on negative peers for both physical and emotional support, making it less likely that young people continue to be part of a gang. Other outcomes are then included to explain exactly how those key intermediate outcomes are achieved (please see the Theory of Change diagram on page 1 for details).

Step 3: Identifying your activities

Definition: what you do, the specific services you deliver through your project.

Tips

- You don't need to include process activities like recruitment or rolling out a survey – only activities that are delivered to directly achieve the impact of the project
- Activities should be sufficiently detailed, so that someone unfamiliar with the programme can understand what each activity entails.
- They can be quantified to explain 'dosage' i.e. to explain exactly how much of the activities each participant takes part in (for example, 1 x 3 hour session per week), and how many people are currently taking part.

Example

This project involves three key activities:

- i) support to access housing,*
- ii) employability and job application support, and*
- iii) mentoring by an ex-offender.*

Top tip: Steps 1 – 3 are an iterative process

Generally you should start by identifying your aim, then outcomes, then activities, but you may find it easier to do this in another order, particularly if your intervention is well established. This is an iterative process, so it is likely you will refine and change some elements as you more clearly define others.

Step 4: Showing the causal links

Definition: arrows which explain the causality of your programme in more detail.

More specifically, causal links should show which activities lead to which outcomes, which outcomes lead to which other outcomes, and which outcomes lead to which aim (if there is more than one aim).

Tips

- Causal links should reflect the complexity of the programme – generally speaking it is likely that some activities will lead to more than one outcome, some outcomes will have more than one activity leading to them, and many outcomes will lead to other outcomes (rather than simply linking an activity directly to the aim).
- However, complexity should also be balanced with clarity – if the number and complexity of causal links are making the Theory of Change difficult to follow or digest, you should consider removing some of the less integral causal links from the diagram.
- Every activity and outcome should eventually link to at least one of your aims.

Example

The project's Theory of Change argues that the activities will reduce young people's likelihood of getting involved in gang activity as; i) housing and employment lead to more stable physical situation, and ii) the support of a mentor and the confidence gained from employment lead to more independence and better ability to make positive life decisions. In turn these elements reduce the need to rely on negative peers.

Step 5: Examining your assumptions

Definition: the underlying conditions that need to exist for your planned changes to occur.

Tips

- The purpose of assumptions is to proactively identify reasons why some of your causal links may not hold true in practice. Ask yourself, for each activity-outcome pair: What assumptions have been made in determining this relationship?
- Assumptions should focus on your most contestable causal links i.e. the sections of your Theory of Change that someone might challenge as being less plausible or convincing.
- They should always sit on top of a specific causal link, rather than 'floating' elsewhere on the diagram.

Example

The project's Theory of Change argues that mentoring by an ex-offender will lead to changes in attitudes and behaviour for the young people taking part in the project. However, they rightly acknowledge that there are assumptions underpinning this claim, in particular that the ex-offenders will be better able to build rapport with the young people. If this doesn't hold true in practice it is likely that the young people will not change their attitudes and behaviour.

The same applies for the assumption about housing being available – this is beyond the control of the project, but not being able to secure housing would jeopardise the project's effectiveness.

Identifying these assumptions may mean that the project alters its activities slightly – for example by forming a relationship with the local authority to prioritise housing applications from the young people on the project, or even exploring options for alternative housing.

Theory of Change and Evaluation Planning

Your Theory of Change is a vital step before planning your evaluation. However, once you start to plan your evaluation, practical considerations such as available data and tools may mean the outcomes on your Theory of Change aren't exactly what you're going to be measuring in your evaluation.

Remember to revisit your Theory of Change once you have planned your evaluation to ensure that there is consistency between these documents!

Useful resources

www.theoryofchange.org/toco-software

www.socialimpacttracker.org

www.mycommunity.org.uk/resources/logic-models-and-templates

or contact us at info@project-oracle.com