

## 2.6: Theory of Change

A theory of change is not an academic theory. Rather, it is the thinking (theory) behind the change a programme or service wants to achieve. It makes very clear the rationale which the work is based upon. It's also been called a 'roadmap' for all to see and understand and, in this sense, needs to be logical. A theory of change is simply a tool - or model - that can show the link between the needs in a specific context and the impact a particular programme or service is intended to have on those needs.

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### **A theory of change can:**

- » Ensure a shared understanding of how a programme or organisation is trying to make a difference.
- » Make explicit different views, assumptions and theories about the change process, especially seemingly obvious ones, enabling you to quickly communicate your strategy.
- » Help people focus on the programme purpose and long-term aim rather than starting from, and maybe getting too caught up in, current activities.
- » Identify the key things to measure that will show whether progress is being made towards the end goal.
- » Help when making a case for support when making approaches to, e.g. funders, donors, policy makers, client organisations, etc.
- » Enable a review of why and how a programme or approach works, and hence whether it is likely to work in other contexts. As well as supporting us to articulate our intention and impact, a theory of change provides a foundation for evidencing our impact. By developing a common language, we can better collectively evaluate and show the impact of the outdoor learning sector.
- » Enable clarity of programme design and delivery that increases the likelihood of reaching desired outcomes more quickly and effectively.

There is no standardised way of presenting a theory of change, and although the components will broadly be the same the terminology and emphasis may vary between organisations and practitioners. Figure 1 summarises the key components.

## How does it work?

Developing a theory of change starts from the position that we should all want to understand whether positive change is created through our work with and for children, young people, adults and organisations, as well as why and how that change happens. The primary reason we want to understand the what, why and how of this change is so that we can continuously reflect on and improve the quality of our work. By doing that, we will increase the impact we have on the lives of the people with whom we work.

There are two ways to approach writing a theory of change: backwards, looking at the bigger picture of what you do as an organisation; and forwards, using it as a planning tool to develop a framework for delivering a specific programme. The process involves bringing key stakeholders together to co-create it, drawing on different perspectives to arrive at a shared vision of what is intended and the means of achieving it.

The subsequent enaction of the theory of change provides a framework for identifying what, where, when and how leaders and participants will gather data to evidence the desired outcomes and impact, as well as ensuring quality across the delivery team.

The theory of change (ToC) begins with the context and identified need that a programme or intervention aims to address. The 'mechanisms of change' created by providers of outdoor learning include not just the activities but the conditions that will contribute to the outcomes achieved by participants. In turn, these outcomes contribute to the impacts, the longer-term effects of the programme, which in turn contribute to the needs and context. Underpinning the ToC is 'quality', which considers consistency across different practitioners and participants and depends on the criteria agreed to gauge success.



Figure 1. Theory of change key components (Anderson, 2020)



## Where high quality outdoor learning practice is taking place

### Providers and practitioners:

- ✓ Know why they do what they do.
- ✓ Are able to articulate the link between programme content and the experiences they provide or facilitate and the intended outcomes.
- ✓ Are able to explain the choice of activities and their relevance to the intended outcomes
- ✓ Are aware of any evidence supporting their chosen approach, either from academic research or from previous programmes.
- ✓ Use a theory of change as a basis for:
  - » Evaluating outcomes.
  - » Monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of practice.

**One way of developing a theory of change is through asking a series of questions about what you want to achieve, and how you are going to do it:**

- » How can participants be involved in co-creating the theory of change?
- » Which other stakeholders could be involved?
- » What is the starting point of your participants? What are their needs?
- » How do you know? What evidence are you using to base this knowledge on? What assumptions are you making?
- » What are you trying to achieve? What drives you, as a practitioner or provider?
- » What is the long-term impact that you hope your input will contribute to? Participants will achieve this for themselves, so how does what you do contribute to this journey? What outcomes is your programme aiming for?
- » What are you giving the people you work with – and the people that bring them to you – that they can use to develop further after they leave you?
- » What do you want your participants to feel, practice and experience while they are with you? If they do these things then how will they help to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours that you hope for?
- » What activities are you going to use to achieve the programme goals? How do the activities you are using (or planning to use) help to achieve these aims?

## Evaluation and impact measurement

A theory of change also provides the basis for an evaluation and impact monitoring framework. Evaluating outcomes and progress gives an overall sense of the success of a programme or areas where improvements can be made. Data can be gathered at different stages that can be used to both inform practice and demonstrate the value of a particular programme, and could, for example, be in the form of evaluation forms, reflections, scoring scales, case studies, numbers of people participating, etc.

The way that data is collected should be considered from an ethical point of view, as how the data is collected will influence the quality of data that is gathered. Cultural beliefs, organisational priorities and practitioner knowledge, skills and experience are important considerations to ensure ethical practice.

## Using a ToC to influence quality

A Theory of Change links together the structures, processes and outcomes that together form the basis for developing and assessing quality of provision. The outcomes and intended long term impact that the programme or session is hoping to achieve, the activities and experiences that will contribute to them, and the mechanisms (i.e. the structures) that enable effective practice to happen are all identifiable through the ToC.

A Theory of Change makes certain assumptions about your practice. For example, you may state that your approach will be based on experiential learning.

Having made this assumption you can now ask whether all your staff team have a shared understanding of what experiential learning is, and then address any training needs that may become apparent. Knowing what these are also provides a basis for monitoring all aspects of the programme from planning through to evaluation.

### Questions to develop practice:

- » Have the staff got the necessary skills and resources to deliver what is planned?
- » Are the conditions for learning that were identified as being critical for success in place and being enacted?
- » Does the programme design match the needs of the group?
- » Are participants experiencing what you intend them to?
- » Are any adaptations that you have made previously working?

## Further reading

Noble, J. (2019) **Theory of change in ten steps**. London: New Philanthropy Capital.

Anderson, N (2020). *Theory of Change*. Institute for Outdoor Learning. <https://www.outdoor-learning.org/standards/outdoor-learning/theory-of-change.html>

**Association of Sail Training Organisations Theory of Change**

## See also

- 2.0 Understanding quality in outdoor learning
- 2.1 Underpinning structures
- 2.2 Safety management and safeguarding
- 2.3 Equity diversity inclusion and belonging
- 2.4 Developing relationships
- 2.5 Outdoor learning the environment and sustainable practice
- 2.7 Continuity and progression

