

Community Mediation Services – Evidencing Effectiveness

1. General

Community Mediation has the same difficulty evidencing effectiveness as measures to prevent re-offending or putting more police officers on the beat – even if levels of neighbourhood conflict go down, less people re-offend, or there is a fall in crime you can't directly evidence that this has occurred because of your intervention. What many people (including the Government) are talking about these days is *plausible association* – in other words, that it is reasonable to believe there may be a direct connection between your activity and a particular change in an environment. So, for instance, it is plausible to associate an increase in neighbour disputes resolved through mediation with a decrease in complaints to the police about neighbour issues. You can't ever prove this is what caused the decrease because there are a host of other factors such as average incomes, employment rates or housing conditions which will affect it, but there is a reasonable or *plausible association*.

Of course there are some things you can provide evidence for, particularly community mediation *outputs* (numbers of clients, meetings held etc). You can also establish some *outcomes*, such as the numbers of conflicts resolved. The following are some areas of evidenced *outputs* and *outcomes* for mediation services, and some *plausible associations* where it would currently be very difficult or impossible to provide hard evidence. Possible measures to improve the availability of evidence are suggested in section 3.

2. Specific Areas

2.1 Resolution of Conflicts (outcome)

Most community mediation services record cases as successful only when the people in the conflict decide mediation has been successful. Analysis of Sacro statistics for 654 cases between April 2008 and March 2009 showed a positive resolution rate (full agreement or improvement) of 84%. There is therefore clear *evidence* that community mediation services are playing a very significant role in resolving conflicts in Scotland.

It is a *plausible assertion* that if these conflicts had not been resolved, there would have been further cost to the public in the form of involvement by the criminal and civil law, medical services, local housing agencies etc.

2.2 Public Advice and Assistance (output)

Many enquiries to mediation services are dealt with through the provision of advice and assistance on how to deal with conflicts. This can be as simple as when and how it is best to approach a neighbour or it can be detailed assistance in exploring options. In 2008/2009 Scottish community mediation services dealt with a total of 3274 public requests for assistance, concerning conflicts involving well over 7000 people.

There is therefore clear *evidence* that community mediation services are a significant source of advice and assistance for the Scottish public when they find themselves in conflict situations.

2.3 Assistance to Public Agencies (output)

In 2008/2009 Scottish community mediation services dealt with a total of 2635 referrals from public agencies such as police, housing departments, housing associations, ASB units, advice bureaux, environmental services departments and other agencies. There is *evidence* that mediation services are providing a well-used service to public agencies, and it is a *plausible assertion* that this saves these agencies financial and time resources.

3. Improving Availability of Evidence

3.1 General

There has been very little substantial research undertaken on community mediation, either in terms of long-term effectiveness, cost or effects on community resilience. What little research there is tends to speak of the potential for helping build stronger, safer communities and the potential for cutting costs of formal action. The Scottish Community Mediation Centre will continue to advocate for research into these areas: we recommend that community mediation services take a positive approach where opportunities for participating in well-planned research present themselves.

3.2 Specific

Community mediation services can ensure they generate as much evidence as possible of their effectiveness by paying close attention to their own data collection, monitoring and evaluation. The following are possible courses of action:

- Establish working relationships with local universities or further education colleges that have research capabilities.
- Consider taking placement students who are capable of undertaking brief research projects.
- Consider introducing surveys that track how clients experience mediation in the longer term e.g. do they feel better equipped to handle conflict, has the amount of conflict in their lives reduced.
- Consider using brief structured interviews to find what clients think would have happened if they hadn't used mediation.
- Undertake research into health/stress levels of clients before and after mediation.
- Undertake a survey of referring agencies to establish how frequently they see clients referred to mediation in the following six months (both for successful and unsuccessful cases).

The Scottish Community Mediation Centre will be happy to assist you in planning research or surveys, or finding information on particular topics.