

# **The practice of a theory-based approach**

**Avril Blamey & Mhairi Mackenzie,  
Research Fellows,  
Health Promotion Policy Unit,  
Dept. of Public Health,  
University of Glasgow.**



# Four Scottish Health Demonstration Projects

- Identify and adopt best practice
- Add value through multi disciplinary working
- Address life circumstances
- Maximise community involvement

# Scottish Health Demonstration Projects

## Focus on two

- CHD “*Have a Heart Paisley*”
- Child Health “*Starting Well*”
  - Theory-based approach is only one part of larger external evaluation
  - Similarities and differences

# Have a Heart Paisley overview

## Work Themes (activities and outcomes)

### Problems

- Significant social and economic deprivation
- CHD rates higher than the Scottish average

- A. Improved primary & secondary prevention
- B. Improved use and sharing of IMT
- C. Improved opportunities for healthier lifestyles
- D. Improved community involvement
- E. Decreased inequalities in health
- F. Improved Partnership working

### Goal

Hope , healthier, longer lives and reduced CHD amongst the residents of Paisley

# Starting Well

Problem → Activities → Goal

Poor child health outcomes within a context of social and economic deprivation

- A. Organisational development
- B. Improved Health visitor home-intervention and the development of a health support worker programme
- C. Improved community support

Reduced child morbidity and increase in number of healthy, functioning families

# Reasons to use a Theory of Change approach

*“ Nothing as practical as a good theory”*

*Carol Weiss 1995*

- **Sharpening planning and implementation**
- **Facilitating the measurement and data collection elements of the evaluation process**
- **Reducing problems associated with casual attribution**

*(Connell & Kubisch 1998)*

# Sharpening planning and implementation

- Use and reception by implementation team
  - Useful to clarify stakeholder expectations
  - Highlight individual projects and overall links
  - Good reception to process and product

# Sharpening planning and implementation

- Use and reception by commissioners
  - Catalyst for performance management input
  - Specification of expectations of internal evaluation
  - Identification of national demonstration lessons
  - Scottish Executive open to process of articulating ToC

# Facilitating measurement and data collection for the evaluation

- Clarity of evaluation framework
  - Different responses re prioritising
  - Focus of external evaluation on cross cutting themes or strands
  - No agreed criteria for internal focus

# Facilitating measurement and data collection for the evaluation

- **Conflict**
  - **Lead to resolution?**
  
- **Evaluator dilemmas**
  - **Degree of involvement**
  - **Ethics**

# Reducing problems associated with causal attribution

- Specificity of ToC
  - **Plausibility**
  - **Testability**
  - **Do-ability**
  - **Meaningfulness**

# Reducing problems associated with causal attribution

- **Barriers to achieving a well specified ToC**
  - **Time**
  - **Problems articulating theories and lack of tools**
  - **Strategic versus operational theories**
  - **Lack of baselines and evidence base**
  - **Inadequate procedures for monitoring**
  - **The inadequacy of linearity in a complex world**

# Attempted solutions

- Dedicated time
- Range of methods
- Tools from performance management
- Strategic & operational level change

# Remaining questions

- **Sharpening planning and implementation?**  
**The emperor's new clothes?**
- **Facilitating the measurement and data collection elements of the evaluation process?**  
**Necessary but not sufficient?**
- **Reducing problems associated with casual attribution?**  
**Will the attribution question ever adequately answered by a Theory of Change?**