



Developing Data Capability in a Local Charity

Fife Gingerbread

A. Introduction

Fife Gingerbread is a good example of a charity which adopted an innovative approach to data capture which both centred upon and empowered its volunteers.

B. Discussion questions

1. Can data support internal goals and objectives as well as externally generated ones?
2. What enables the charity to make the most of its data?
3. What key challenge has the charity had to manage as it has become more data-informed?

C. Organisational profile

Fife Gingerbread is an independent local charity providing support to lone parents and families living in disadvantaged circumstances. The charity has an annual income of circa £950,000. Its chief officer is supported by a team of thirty staff and approximately the same number of volunteers. The charity supports in excess of 980 service users annually, some accessing two or more of the charity's services.

D. What is driving the charity's engagement with data?

Fife Gingerbread gathers and uses data because it helps the chief officer, together with her Board and management team, to make informed decisions about both long-term strategy and

day-to-day services, as well as meeting compliance and reporting purposes. The Chief Officer's prior background in the Further Education field has her an appreciation of the importance of evidence in the form of 'hard data' together with an understanding of its value in funding applications, service planning, and performance evaluation.

E. How important is digital technology for the charity's data utilisation?

Digital systems are an essential component of Fife Gingerbread's operational infrastructure. The charity's case management system uses the cloud-based Fife Online Referral Tracking (FORT) system. The charity also uses Sage accounting software and Microsoft Excel. The freely available Google Analytics software is also used in analysing and reporting data generated by the charity's public website, Facebook and Twitter pages.

F. What types of data is the charity capturing and using?

The charity captures personal data about its service users, including referral data, appointment data, and progression and impact data generated as service users move through a service pathway. It is also beginning to capture data about its Facebook and Twitter users which allows it to see their demographic characteristics, how they want to use the online media, and their perceptions and experiences of the charity. The charity has also captured data about the experiences of single parents that provided it with an evidence-base from which to advocate for public policy reform.

G. What is data enabling the charity to do differently or better?

Managing case loads

Data is affording Fife Gingerbread the opportunity to establish a 'traffic light' system which is enabling it to manage its growing list of referrals and active case loads more efficiently and effectively. The traffic light system enables referrals and active cases to be classified as 'red', 'amber' or 'green', with the colour codes signifying levels of urgency or vulnerability and

indicating the degree of support required by individual service users at particular stages in their journey through the charity's services. This enables the charity to identify high risk cases and quickly to refer these on to other appropriate organisations if it does not have the capacity to take on a particular case at that time. It also enables the charity to monitor staff case loads, so that staff have balanced and manageable workloads.

Monitoring progression

Data is also enabling Fife Gingerbread to track which of its service users 'progress' to a volunteering role with the charity, and which volunteers progress from this into employment or return to education. As the charity aims to build the skills and self-confidence of its service users by providing them with opportunities to volunteer, the capability to track their progression from first referral, through its service pathway, into a volunteering role, and then into education or employment provides crucial performance data. As well as demonstrating the impact of its services for individual service users, in anonymised and aggregated form the data also afford the opportunity to identify patterns and trends over time and to compare the effectiveness of particular interventions.

Bringing evidence to the public policy process

Data that Fife Gingerbread gathered on the impact of rural living on the quality of life and employability of lone parents enabled it to contribute to the public policy-making process in this field. The findings were presented to the Scottish Parliament, affording the charity a robust and evidence-based voice within the public policy-making process and thereby fulfilling a key strand of its charitable Mission.

H. What are the challenges associated with being a data-informed charity and how are these being managed?

The charity is facing two key challenges as it seeks to become more data-informed.

Limited resources to invest in data capture

The first challenge that the charity faces is that it has limited resources to invest in research-based data capture. However, by working in collaboration with The Poverty Alliance, one of its key organisational partners, and by drawing on its own volunteers, Fife Gingerbread has been able to deliver a successful research project. The Poverty Alliance delivered research skills training to the volunteers and oversaw their engagement in each of the key stages of the research project, while Fife Gingerbread's Volunteer Development Coordinator provided personal and emotional support. As well as resolving the current challenge, this approach has delivered a new in-house research capability that can be drawn on, again, in the future.

Sensitive use of data

The second challenge that the charity faces is that data affords the opportunity to become target driven. However, while the chief officer and her management team must ensure that service targets are met within budget and on time, the frontline support workers must remain able to prioritise quality of service. Their emphasis has to be on ensuring that individual service users are able to progress through the service at the pace and timescale best suited to their needs. This 'tension' is managed by giving the chief officer and her senior team access to performance data as and when required, while it is made available retrospectively to the support workers.

I. What are the charity's next steps with data?

The potential exists to 'link' anonymised aggregated datasets, 'owned' by Fife Gingerbread and its different partners and held separately within the FORT system. This could afford new and valuable insights into the multi-faceted and, therefore, more complex issues experienced by the charity's service users. It could also lead to better understanding of which interventions are effective in situations in which multiple agencies are delivering support to an individual with complex needs. Clearly, analysis using linked datasets would need the agreement of Fife Gingerbread's relevant partners.

Potentially, there are valuable new insights to be gleaned by Fife Gingerbread if case management data that is currently in the form of ‘unstructured’ qualitative text could be digitally analysed. Extracting and analysing the data manually would be difficult, time-consuming, and costly. As the software to analyse unstructured text is being developed this option may become available in the longer-term.

The charity’s Facebook and Twitter analytics offer potentially rich data streams once the charity is clearer about how best to use this data.

J. Some insights from the case study

- Data is employed in strategic planning, day-to-day service planning, performance evaluation, and public policy advocacy, as well as for compliance and reporting purposes.
- The chief officer and her team attach high importance to data and it is routinely used at Board level, and by the CEO and her management team. Digital systems have an important part to play in supporting the charity’s developing data capabilities. With appropriate training and support volunteers can be an important asset in a charity’s data utilisation strategy.
- If data is carefully and thoughtfully used organisations can avoid becoming target driven.

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For further information please contact Dr Eleanor Burt, School of Management, University of St Andrews, Fife, UK, KY16 9SS. Email: eb19@st-andrews.ac.uk.