

DATA LABS PROJECT

NPC’s Data Labs project aims to open up government administrative data to the not-for-profit sector to help organisations better understand the impact of their services on beneficiaries. It’s a four-year programme funded by the Oak Foundation.

NPC proposed the concept for, and supported the development of, the first Data Lab—the [Justice Data Lab](#)—launched by the Ministry of Justice in April 2013. This enables organisations to compare the re-offending rates of their service users with those of a matched comparison group. We are now supporting the development of further Data Labs in **employment/benefits**, **health** and **substance misuse**, and are also working to **increase the demand** for data for impact measurement.

Key elements of the Data Labs approach

- Not-for-profit organisations can access government-held data about their clients either directly or through a government or third-party service.
- A comparison group can be established either through statistical matching or by drawing on a prior random assignment. Where a comparison group is difficult to establish, before and after comparisons can be made.
- The impact of a not-for-profit organisation can be presented as a comparison of the grouped outcomes of their service users vs non service users. Individual level depersonalised data can also be provided where service users have given their consent.
- Results of impact measurement are voluntarily shared across the sector to build a body of evidence for what works to achieve particular outcomes.

Government departments are increasingly making their data accessible through the open data agenda—however releasing data alone does not encourage its use. Organisations need to be shown the potential of data and demand and skills need to be built up.

Benefits of the Data Labs approach

For not-for-profit organisations...

A Data Lab provides a clear route for accessing government data. These datasets can be used to show the outcome for clients and to compare service users to similar people who did not receive a service.

For researchers...

As more organisations undertake robust impact measurement using a Data Lab, the body of evidence increases. This can then be used for meta-analyses to understand better what works.

For government data holders...

A Data Lab makes government data more accessible and easy to use—including for organisations with limited resources or skills. It also allows for comparisons and increased learning within sectors.

For service users...

If organisations use a Data Lab to better understand which interventions work or do not work, service provision can be improved—which will lead to better outcomes for those in need.

What are the challenges?

Creating a Data Lab is not simple, and we’ve identified five key barriers that can hinder development and uptake. These are: *awareness* (where data can be found); *legal* (data sharing and consent); *technical* (accessing data in a usable format and identifying metrics); *attitudinal* (recognising the value of data for impact measurement); and *resource* (time and money to develop/respond to the service). These are discussed further in our report [Creating a Data Lab](#).

Please visit www.NPCdatalabs.org for more information or contact Tracey Gyateng, Data Labs Project Manager, via Tracey.Gyateng@thinkNPC.org