



Iriss

NAVIGATING EVIDENCE

A reflective tool to support evidence use in practice

Introduction

Welcome to Navigating Evidence, a resource that aims to equip newly qualified social workers with the skills and confidence to use evidence in practice. It will also be useful to anyone working in social services, students and practice educators who would like to reflect on using evidence.

Using evidence in practice is considered a critical professional social work skill (Bingham et al. 2016). Skills associated with the evidence-informed practice process, such as information retrieval, evaluation and synthesis, have been found to support problem-solving and decision-making (Wheeler and Goodman 2007). The ability to interrogate evidence for its complexity is also essential, as evidence “is often contested, and at times ambiguous” (Diaz and Drewery 2016).

When starting your social work career, it can be hard to work with evidence and apply it to real-life situations. Research suggests that students of social work and qualified practitioners are often pressured to embrace evidence-informed practice without the knowledge or resources to access and make use of research findings (Daniel et al. 2016, Wong 2017).

This tool will take you on a journey that explores what evidence is and what is required to make good evidence-informed decisions. By the end, you will feel more confident about using evidence to make changes in your practice, and understand the important role your organisation plays in making this happen.

References

- Bingham, TJ et al. (2016) Merging information literacy and evidence-based practice for social work students. *New Library World*, 117(3/4), pp.201-213.
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- Diaz, C and Drewery, S (2016) A critical assessment of evidence-based policy and practice in social work. *Journal of Evidence-Informed Social Work*, 13(4), pp.425-431.
- Wheeler, DP and Goodman, H (2007) Health and mental health social workers need information literacy skills. *Health & Social Work*, 32(3), pp.235-237.
- Wong, R (2017) Evaluating a teaching module on ethically responsible evidence-based practice decision making in an advanced micro practice course. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 53(2), pp.240-259.

What is Evidence?

It's important to start your evidence journey by examining, and reflecting on, what evidence is. Evidence can include the following things.

Published research findings: This might be the first thing to come to mind when you think about evidence. It can include publications like journals, academic papers, theoretical research findings and books about social work practice.

People's lived experience: People's direct experiences and views about what matters to them. This could include conversations you have with people, documentaries, case studies, blogs or Twitter interactions. Autobiographies or books written by people with direct experiences can also be helpful sources of lived experience.

Data: Data about what works well, such as audits and evaluations, can be really helpful sources of evidence. Other sources of data can help you spot patterns or get a better understanding of what interventions might work.

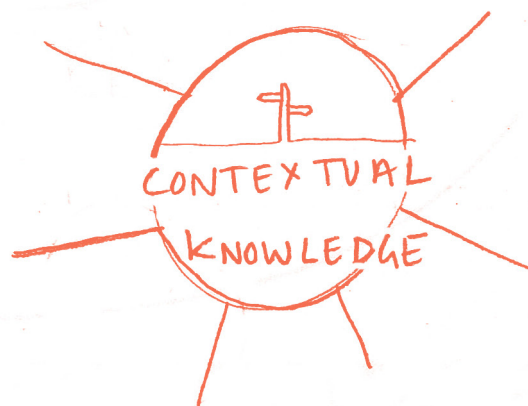
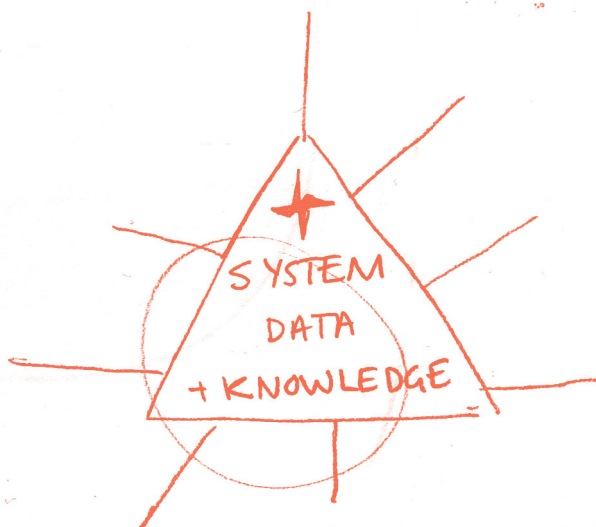
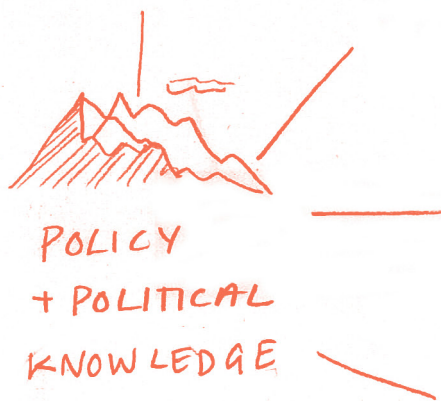
Policy and political knowledge: Exploring the evidence presented in policy papers, guidelines and briefings about social care can aid your decision-making, as well as expose when evidence

is lacking. Policy knowledge can complement contextual knowledge at a local (organisational policy), regional (local authority policy) and national (government policy) level.

Contextual knowledge: Having evidence about your local context can help you explore what would work best for the people you are working with. National context is also important when it comes to the kinds of intervention you can make in particular settings. Having a good understanding of what other approaches have worked well in similar situations can inspire.

Practice wisdom: Colleagues and peers bring their experiences and insight. This is a form of evidence – the gut feelings, intuition and pattern recognition that people develop over years of practice is a valuable tool to aid you in decision-making. When exploring this with your peers, dig deep to find out how they are making decisions and why.

Use this tool to help you reflect on the types of evidence you use. This could include formal sources, such as journals, subscriptions or supervision. It can also include more informal platforms such as Twitter, friends and your own lived experience.



Intuition Iceberg

Often 'gut feelings' or intuition are excluded when thinking about evidence. Intuition can be viewed as opposite to evidence. However, this doesn't need to be the case.

You can think of your gut feeling as the tip of an iceberg. It is the aspect of your knowledge that is most obvious, and that you see first. Yet it is often not as simple as you might think.

Underneath the surface there are many factors at play.

Your gut feelings about a situation or person are created from layers of experience, knowledge and observations. It is key that you recognise the value of your inherent knowledge as practitioners, and learn to unpick what your gut feelings are telling you.

How to use this tool

Think about a situation in which you had a strong gut feeling. Write it down in the tip of the iceberg.

Now think about all of the things that you know about that situation that led to your gut feeling.

You can list these in the area of the iceberg that is underneath the surface.

For example:

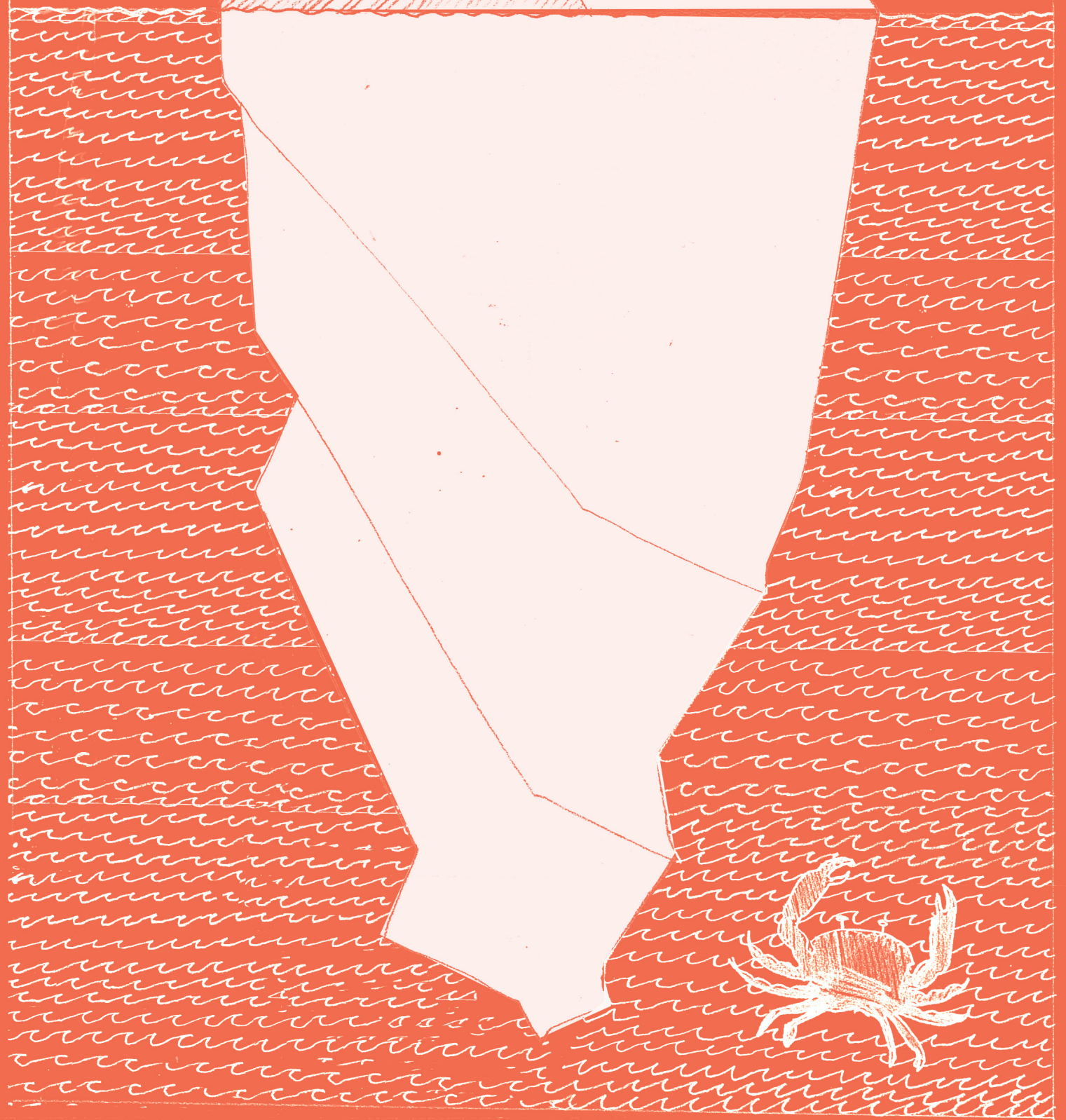
- Things you have read
- Your knowledge of people's lived experience
- Your own direct experience and reflections
- Data you know about
- Patterns you recognise
- Your knowledge of how the system works
- The law
- Political ideas and policy
- Your knowledge about the community
- Your self-awareness of your own bias

Identifying and considering all evidence sources and applying critical thinking can help you work out what is the best approach in any given situation.

You need to be accountable, open, and clear about the evidence on which decisions or actions are based.

You need to understand your own unconscious bias - we all hold certain social stereotypes about groups and people.

GUT FEELINGS



Confidence with evidence

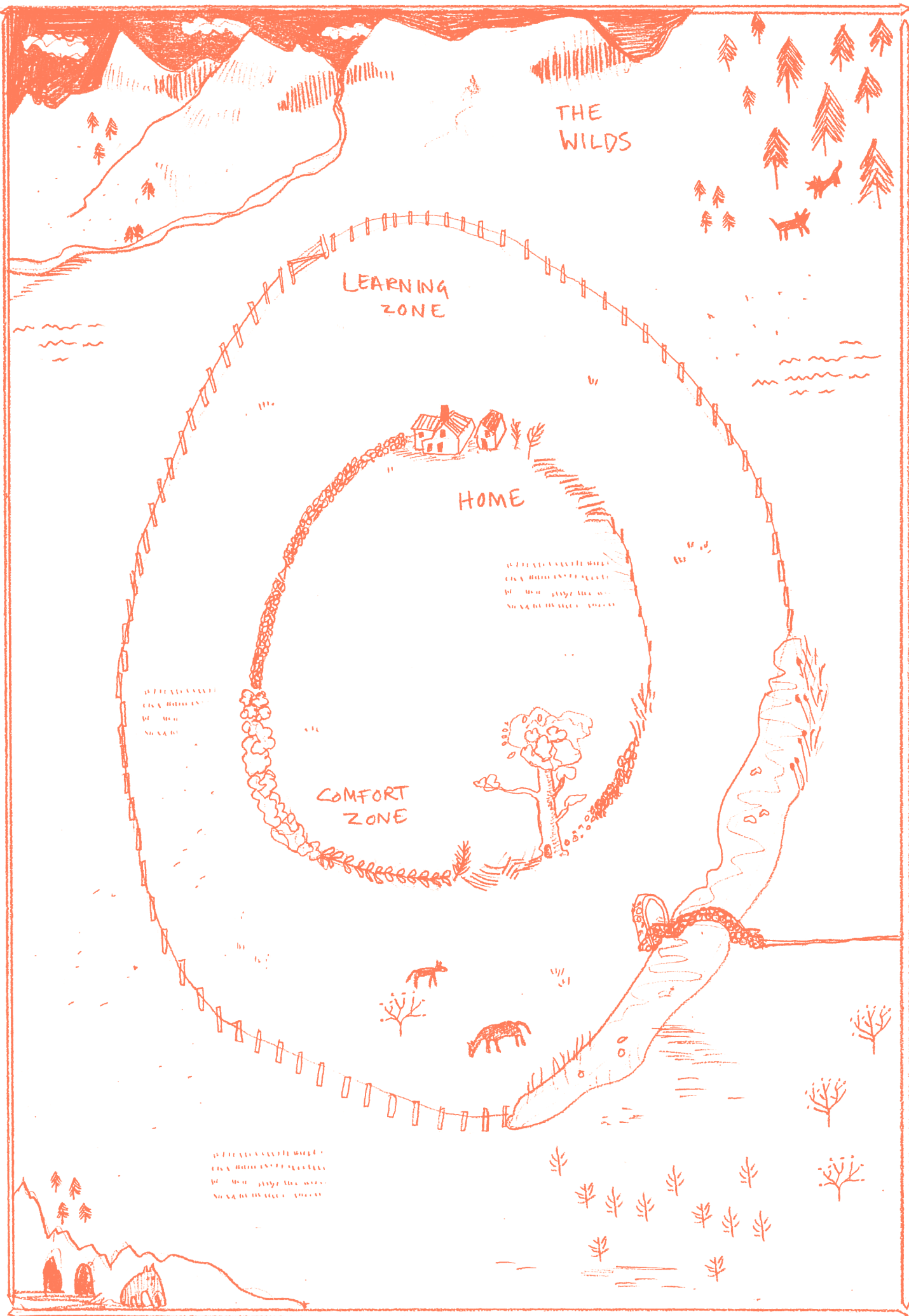
Reflect on the 'What is Evidence' tool you have just completed. Are there some types of evidence you naturally gravitate towards? Are there some kinds that you have lots of resources and leads for, and others that you don't really know where to start with?

Use the 'Comfort Zone' tool to reflect on what types of evidence you are comfortable using. Write down the types of evidence you are comfortable and confident using in the 'Comfort' zone. Then think about types of evidence that you understand a little. These go in the 'Learning Zone'. Finally consider the types of evidence you find daunting, confusing or just plain scary! Write these down in 'The Wilds'.

Then reflect, either on your own or with peers, on how you can expand your 'Comfort' and 'Learning' zones to include more types of evidence.

Who could support your journey from 'Comfort' zone to 'The Wilds' and help you expand the evidence types you are confident using?

What things could you do regularly to increase your confidence around the types of evidence you find most daunting?



THE
WILDS

LEARNING
ZONE

HOME

COMFORT
ZONE

When do you need evidence?

The first step in using evidence in practice is to identify a situation where it is applicable.

Sometimes this is obvious - you need to find out more information before you can make a decision.

Other times it may be more subtle, based on things like a lack of confidence, uncertainty or conflicting approaches.

Once you have identified the need for evidence use this tool to work through your initial thoughts.

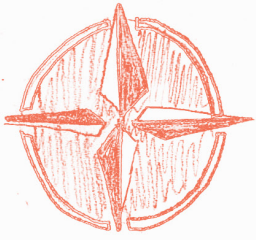
It can help you formulate a clearer research question.

Examples of situations that can call for evidence include:

- ✱ **General:** You know what the problem is, but have no particular solutions in mind.
- ✱ **Specific:** You know what the problem is and have a solution in mind, but you want to know whether it may work or not.
- ✱ **Comparative:** You know what the problem is, have several solutions in mind but want to know which one will be the most effective.

When you have identified that you need to access evidence, it is good to formulate your ideas by developing a **clear research question**. This helps you understand exactly what you are looking for, as well as helping you to consider practical considerations, such as how you are planning to use the evidence and any timescales that are involved. Even when you're setting out to do some searching on your own, it is still helpful to ask yourself these questions, and make a note of your goals. Some people keep notes in a spreadsheet, but you can do this in any way you want.

What is your research question?



What
is the
topic?

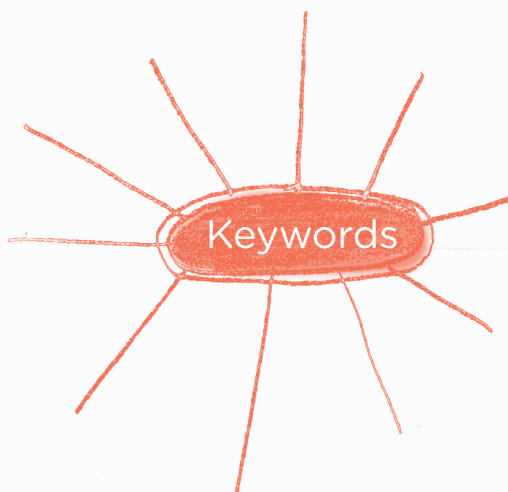
What is the
context?

Do you have an idea
about what information
you don't want?



What
is your
timescale?

How do you plan to
use the evidence?



Balancing evidence

When you have collected evidence that is applicable to the situation you have identified, it is important to reflect on the balance of evidence. Complete the 'Evidence Compass' to see what sources of knowledge you may be overlooking.

If there are gaps, revisit the previous sections of the tool to get ideas of where you could source some more evidence to inform your decision-making.

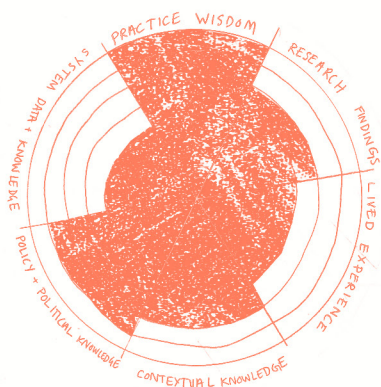
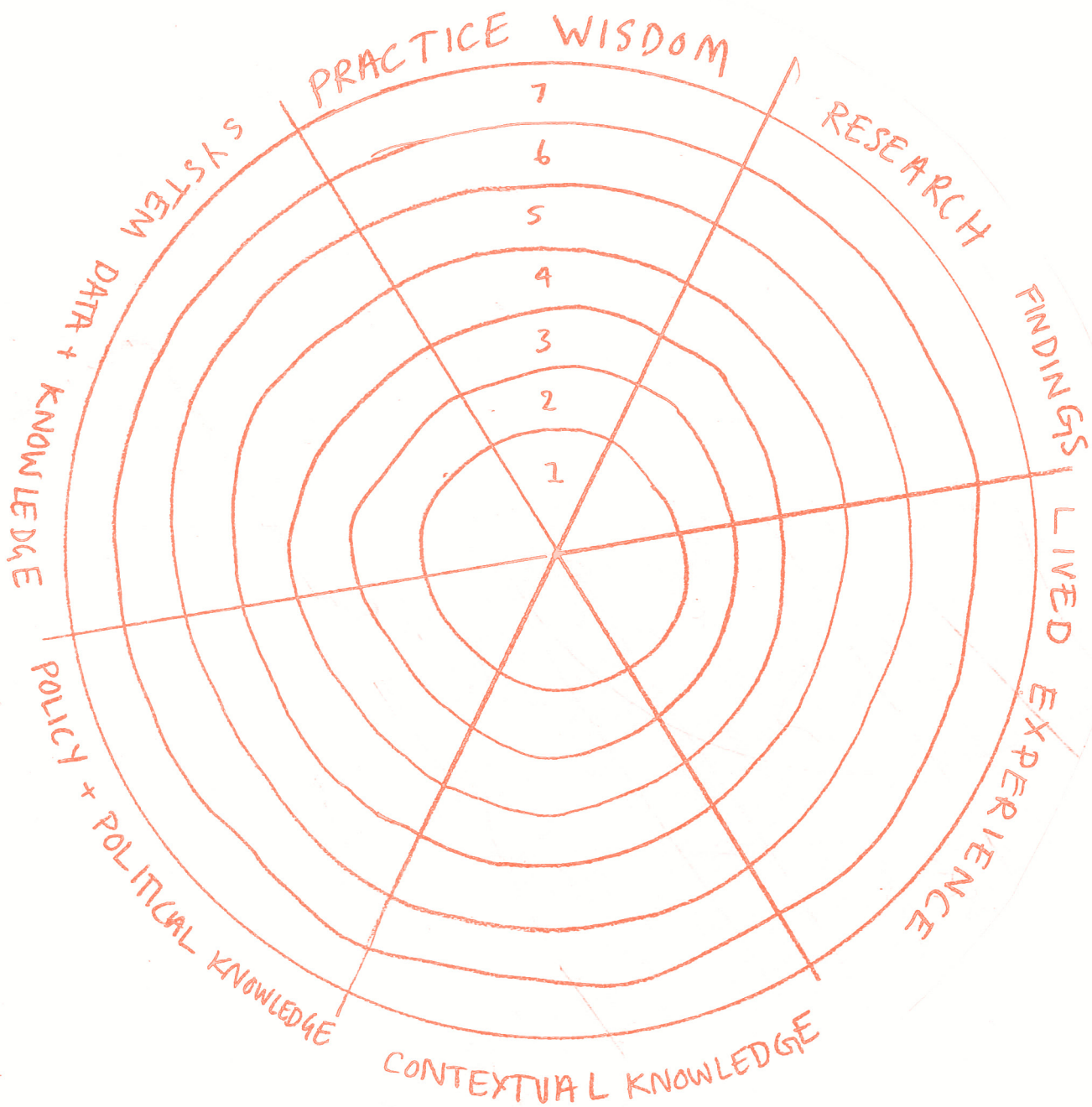
The aim of the Balancing evidence tool is to help you achieve a full 'target' of evidence distribution across the different types of evidence.

Colour in the rings that relate to your stage in the collection of evidence in each category.

Of course, it is not always possible to have a balanced selection of evidence. For example, research findings may be slim if you are looking at an under-researched area. Aim to colour in as much as possible and use it as reflection tool!

Do you have a balance of evidence to explore?

Do you have ideas of other places you could look for evidence?



1. I haven't even looked yet
2. I know where to look
3. I have done a search / contacted people
4. I have done a lot of reading / listening
5. I have compiled and reviewed gaps
6. I have collected most of the evidence
7. I have collected enough of the evidence

Cultures of evidence

Often social workers find it difficult to implement evidence in practice, despite knowing how to access and work with it. This can be due to the cultures surrounding evidence use in the workplace (Nordsteien and Byström 2018). The ability to act on evidence is not only shaped by your capacity as an individual, but also that of your organisation. Without organisational support and resources, you will find it more difficult to use evidence effectively.

It is important to know where you sit on this spectrum so you can manage expectations and your approach to evidence gathering.




It may be that at this early stage in your career you feel you have little scope or capacity to make changes to how things work. You might instead want to focus on evidence gathering around how you as an individual work with people who use services, or see your evidence gathering as a personal learning journey towards improving practice.

Nordsteien, A and Byström, K (2018) Transitions in workplace information practices and culture: the influence of newcomers on information use in healthcare. *Journal of Documentation*, 74(4), pp.827–843.

Use the 'Are we there yet?' tool to identify where your organisation sits on a spectrum of supporting evidence use.

What could we do to improve the evidence culture in our organisation?

Are we there yet?

	 NOT YET	 ON OUR WAY	 YES!
The organisation is motivated to make change			
Lived experience is seen as 'real' evidence			
There is a culture of collaboration			
Time is made available to staff			
There is peer support			
There is a culture of trust			
People with lived experience are involved in the organisation			
Staff are appreciated for their skills and knowledge			
Feedback is encouraged			
There is supportive policy landscape			
There is funding available to support people with lived experience to take part in the design of services			
Reflective practice is embedded in the organisation			
There is support from networks			

Using evidence to inform

When you've found all your evidence, you need to determine how relevant and applicable the findings are in relation to your service.

Searching, finding and generating evidence will not always point to clear actions. It may be that more research or enquiry is needed - you may have found that the evidence you are looking for doesn't exist or doesn't answer your research question well.

However, if you do find evidence that points towards change a number of questions must be considered. To be confident in using specific evidence as a basis for decisions, you must be sure that it relates to your own service.

Your own knowledge and experience are crucial for putting research evidence into context.

In an ideal scenario, you will have a number of good quality sources of evidence which point to a single conclusion. Of course, in the real world, this is often not the case. Sometimes you will find, particularly in an area where little structured study has been undertaken, that the evidence can point to more than one conclusion, or that sources of evidence point to conflicting conclusions. It is important to consider what you would do in this situation.

If you find yourself in a situation where you have collated evidence that contradicts itself, then you can use the 'Conflicting evidence' tool to help work through some questions.

What is specific about the context you are working in?

How can you factor this in when weighing up evidence?

Conflicting evidence

Are the sources reliable and equally trustworthy?

Are the methods used in the sources equally robust?

Can the conflict be accounted for?

Is the conflict 'real' or due to interpretation or presentation of the results?

Can the conclusions of the evidence co-exist?

Is there more evidence for one conclusion than another?



Creating change

If your evidence points towards making changes in your practice or organisation, it may mean that you need to share your findings.

A key step in this process is to organise the information into a logical format and to paraphrase what you have found. It is important to keep your audience in mind when doing this. Different audiences will want to see information presented in different ways. For example, they may have varying levels of understanding of technical terms and will want to see different levels of detail.

What jargon do you need to explain to people so that they will understand your evidence?

When planning how you will share your findings, make sure you:

- Are clear about the overall message and benefits
- Have identified your key points and organised them in a logical way
- Restate the original reason behind searching for the evidence and the background to it
- Make relevant links between the evidence you have uncovered and the given context
- You may find it useful to provide brief summaries of the evidence you have found. This will give readers a structured overview of the evidence and allow them to see what you have based your conclusions on.

When summarising evidence:

- State the issue addressed by the evidence and why it is relevant to your own setting
- Briefly describe how the evidence was gathered, for example, what methods were used, the characteristics of the person or group to whom the evidence refers, what was actually done, what was measured, and how the data was analysed
- Critically appraise the methods if appropriate
- Briefly describe the results and their importance
- Explain the implications of the results for your own service

How the evidence was gathered



Critically appraise the methods

Briefly describe the results and their importance



Implications for your service setting

Turning evidence into action

Whatever scale of practice change you're considering, be prepared to respond to challenges and resistance to change.

Present your messages in ways that make sense to your colleagues and that take account of constraints.

Focus on the gains, including improved outcomes for service users, any saved resources, staff development opportunities, links to new policies or legislation, and potential positive publicity.

For success, both the new practice and its method of implementation need to be carefully thought through.

New practices or methods that have been successfully implemented tend to share a number of common characteristics.

The following tool helps you to determine whether the idea suggested by your evidence shares these characteristics.

At this point you have found good quality evidence in answer to your research question, decided the evidence has direct bearing on your own service and shared the evidence with key stakeholders.

Now the task of actual implementation begins. This step of the toolkit is designed to help you to select, implement and evaluate a new practice or method.

Implementation can be the hardest aspect of getting evidence into practice.

Before acting on evidence, it is important to consider whether the change you are contemplating is in line with the strategic objectives of your organisation and/or the needs of service users.

When evidence points to the need for a new practice, it is important that you develop an action plan to implement it.

Use the action plan tool overleaf to plan out a timescale for what would need to happen when.

- Think about the milestones in the process that you hope to achieve.
- Think about who you need to have on board at different points in the process.
- What resources do you need to have in place to support the change?
- What risks are there that you need to be aware of?

Obvious need: Can the proposed change be understood as a solution to an existing problem?

Clear benefits: Are you convinced that change will result in benefits?

Congruent values: Are new practices in line with individual and organisational values?

Simple: Can the change be kept simple and small scale, at least initially?

Testable: Can new practices be tested on a small scale and with minimal risk?

Visible: Are there quickly observed benefits that will make change easier to achieve?

Adaptable: Can you adapt a new practice to existing conditions and make it easier to implement?

Scalable: Is the new practice applicable to more than one service context or group?



DATE _____

WHAT NEEDS

TO HAPPEN



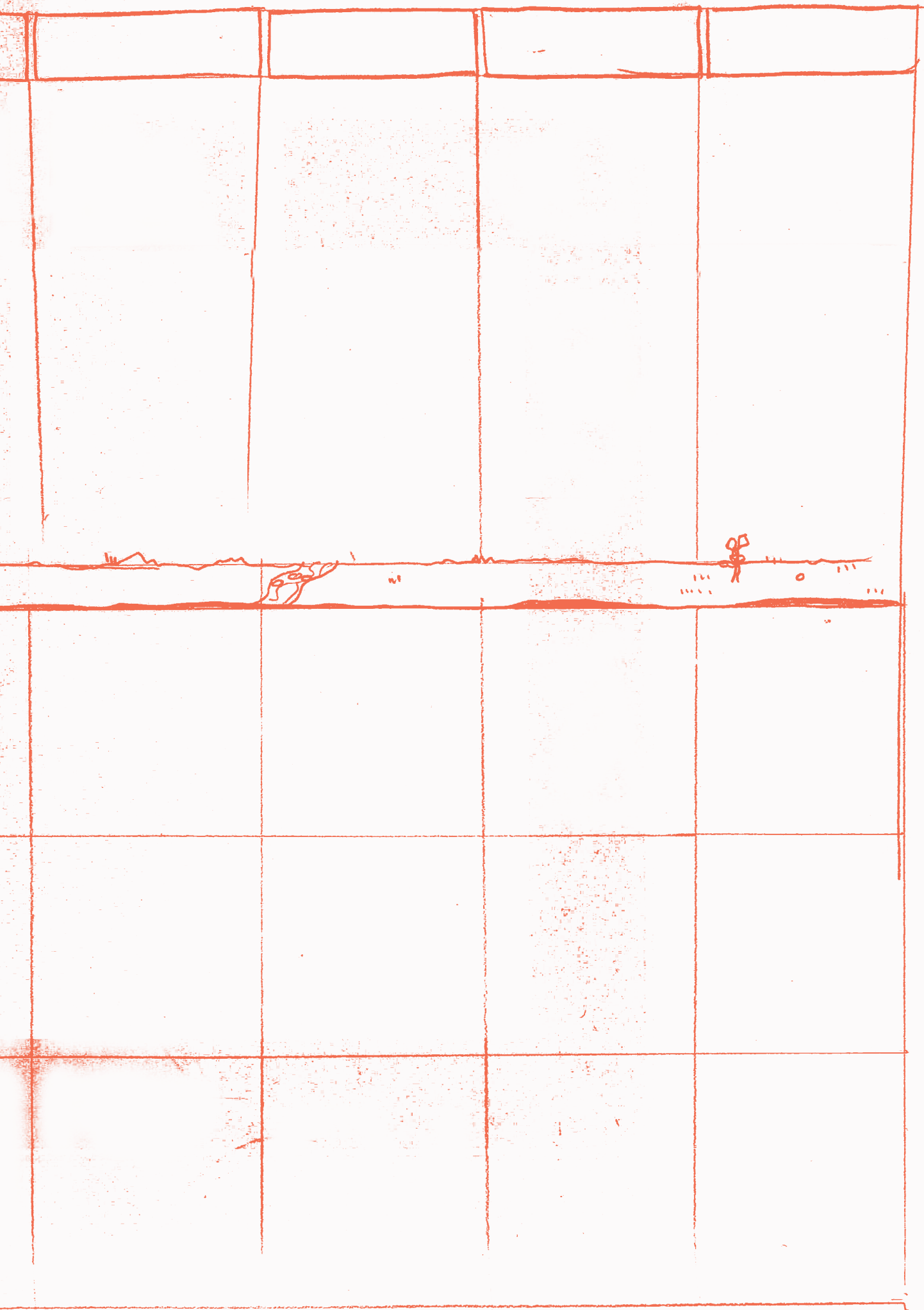
WHO?



RESOURCES



RISKS





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to support your use of evidence
in practice.