

At a glance

What are programme implementers' perspectives on collecting and using cost data?

What we found out

- Programme sites varied in terms of how much cost data they had collected, the extent to which they had begun planning or implementing local cost data analysis, and the degree to which they ascribed importance to cost data analysis as compared to impact data analysis.
- The relative importance of cost data collection, analysis, and presentation to programme implementers may be driven in part by their perceptions of audience priorities (such as those of schools, the community, or commissioners).
- Barriers to collecting and using cost data include the difficulties of costing a complex programme, contextual constraints, missing data, and the limitations of economic evaluation tools.

Why we did this study

Systematic reviews of economic evaluations have concluded that there is economic merit in funding mental health and wellbeing prevention and early intervention programmes for young people. However, their conclusions are limited by the relatively small number of economic evaluations that have been conducted, and the varying quality and diversity of evaluation methodologies.

Economic evaluations often take place within the context of randomised controlled trials (RCT). However, economic evaluations conducted within tightly controlled RCT settings may not generalise to real-world settings. More economic evaluations of prevention and early intervention programmes are needed to examine their costs, benefits, feasibility, and transferability across different contexts.

Staff working on the ground to deliver programmes are often best placed to collect and provide data on the costs, duration, and resource-use of activities to inform economic evaluations. Little is known to date however, about their perspective on economic evaluations, particularly their motives for engagement, and any barriers or facilitators that they may experience in a real-world implementation setting.

Why this is important

The cost of mental illness to the UK economy is estimated at £70-100 billion each year*. Mental disorders are rising among children and adolescents in the UK. Economic evaluations of prevention and early intervention programmes are important to ensure that public resources are spent on delivering cost-effective interventions, where costs are outweighed by benefits. Understanding barriers and facilitators for collecting and using cost data is needed to design robust economic evaluations.

What we did

We led group discussions with staff members at six sites in the fourth year of the HeadStart programme – a prevention and early intervention programme in schools to improve mental health among young people in England. We took detailed notes during the discussions about how HeadStart teams collected and used cost data. We analysed our data thematically to explore patterns across the sites in terms of their views and experiences.

What are the implications

Our findings speak to the **difficulties of imposing a systematic and standardised method for cost data analysis** in the context of real-world implementation of a complex, multi-area-level, prevention and early intervention programme.

Our findings have **implications for the future development of economic evaluation tools** intended for implementers to use in a real-world programme delivery setting. Economic evaluation tools should not be too time-consuming, complex, or burdensome for programme staff to use, and need to be compatible with the structure of the programme.

*Reference available in full report