Local Trust

A short paper reflecting Maria O'Beirne's presentation to the Local Trust Seminar in July 2023

I was very pleased to attend the Local Trust/Arts and Humanities Research Council Seminar, back in July to talk about the role and positioning of evaluations of community-led, place-based projects for policy making.

Two of the questions which I was asked to reflect on in my discussion were:

- How do we meaningfully evaluate, and measure, community-led place based social action and change?
- What is missed when we only focus on what can be easily measured?

I spoke from my experience as a government social researcher and analyst and so these are my own words rather than an official position. Of course, there are other analytical perspectives from my peers that will differ from my own, but that is the benefit of working with a wide range of views. Events like the Local Trust seminar are important for sharing our collective experiences of scoping research and analysis and the diverse approaches we could take.

The primary question I ask at the start of most projects is - for whom is this research?

The majority of new research that my team and I have led has been on behalf of the policymakers working in central government. The new research and evaluation projects were delivered in-house or contracted out to help the policy teams demonstrate how their intervention had worked, providing details of their impact, and offering an assessment of value for money for future use in HM Treasury business cases and Public Accounts Committee hearings. Of course, the research participants in these studies and our working partners matter, because without their involvement and support, the research would not have happened. With their help and insight, we are building an evidence base to support public accountability and to provide assessments of whether the same kinds of mechanisms will work, if rolled out in other places across the country.

How do we meaningfully evaluate, and measure, community-led place based social action and change?

When government departments evaluate their programmes and policies, they strive to follow tried and tested frameworks (such as the Magenta and Green Books published by HMT) and to draw on the advice of the Trials Advice Panel and Evaluation Task Force – to strengthen and test the methodologies. These expert resources are in place to raise standards, improve consistency in approach and provide confidence and assurance to users of the research findings.

In my time working as a government analyst, my team and I have applied these methodological frameworks to the evaluations of the Integrated Areas Programme; the ESOL

(English for Speakers of Other Languages) for Integration Fund Programme, the Controlling Migration Fund, the Communities Fund and more recently the Community Vaccines Champion Fund, all of which involved central government working with local government, their partners and communities to produce behavioural and attitudinal changes.

These evaluations offer a benchmark for later local studies to compare their results and a perspective to explain the implications of these studies. This is a good thing, because if we want to support continuous improvement, we need to build on what we have learned, from the successes and the mistakes along the way.

However, one of the biggest challenges for our evaluations is their duration. Many of our programmes have social impacts which are only apparent over time, often beyond the funding window for the programme and the scope of the evaluation. This is an ongoing challenge that needs more than one organisation to find the best remedy.

As a government analyst I expect our analysis and evidence to be challenged. I see the value of such scrutiny because the policy makers, whom we support, have to explain if public money has been spent well, and what lessons have been learned from the way we used that money.

When trying to measure community impact in a short, fixed timeframe and with fixed resources, the choice of design and metrics is fundamental. A lot of consideration goes into the selection of metrics for community focused evaluations. In my experience when identifying and selecting metrics, I have looked at what the policy is trying to achieve over the specified timeframe, using tools like theory of change and logic models, working with the policy team and their partners to develop the elements of the logic model, and reviewing them as the policy is implemented. I have looked at what kinds of impacts are sought and what might be achieved unexpectedly (unintended consequences) and I look at what way those indicators can be measured through existing or new data sources.

When I need to measure comparative change between places, people, or interventions, I require enough quantitative data points to undertake that analysis robustly so that I may confidently determine what kind of change has occurred and by what degree. This is the expected empirical research which our evaluations are seeking to complete and share. We use these approaches because they enable us to answer strategic questions in an empirical way that our primary audience understand and value.

Where possible, I am trying to build on the existing evidence base, so it makes sense to use existing data sources and metrics, where they are appropriate. This helps to make sure that the datasets are well-utilized (boosting their value for money) and their potential to provide trend data is optimised. I also want to encourage data linkage and sharing where it will provide richer insights on a research matter and give a more rounded set of findings. From experience, data linking is complicated to organise and requires public willingness to share their data for research purposes, and there is still a way to go to realise its potential.

I know that we can't measure everything in every place. It is not practical to do that, so most of our evaluations on communities have involved sampling people or places to exemplify the situation on the ground and to enable us to generalise further afield.

We also have to prioritise which questions we address through evaluations – which ones are necessary for future policy and spending plans and which ones are nice-to-knows, that potentially other researchers might progress through their work.

It is arguably true that researchers outside of government have more scope to lead on exploratory and contextual research than government analysts. That is also why sharing the development of an evidence base across sectors and disciplines is essential to support.

Against this backdrop, I return to the two questions asked at the start:

1. How do we meaningfully evaluate, and measure, community-led place-based social action and change?

   I think we should continue to think about for whom we are doing the research and how can we provide the best evidence to answer their questions. This may mean different approaches are still necessary for government-led projects compared with public or academic-led projects. These different approaches are equally important because they provide different perspectives on the same matter, but there is more we could do to study their collective findings together.

2. What is missed when we only focus on what can be easily measured?

   We acknowledge that much research is undertaken at pace because of time-limited resources, and this has implications for the breadth and depth of all enquiry. What might appear to be a simple indicator, may be a proxy for a more complex set of metrics. There is more scope for bringing together data derived from different projects led by different sectors. This kind of analytical collaboration needs endorsement and support from all sectors, to become more popular and routine. Events like this Local Trust seminar play a valuable role in promoting this form of collaborative knowledge sharing.

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