

Does it Count ? Evaluating ‘People Power’ approaches in communities

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This meeting on research and evaluation is the first in our series of Forum events under the Together for Change Programme. For those of you who are new to us, the Programme was set up by Solva Care in partnership with PLANED and Pembrokeshire Association of Voluntary Services, PAVS.

The purpose of the Programme is for the sectors to work closely together to support and sustain community groups through three workstreams: developing joint plans based on social and green models of health and wellbeing; building and using the evidence base; and supporting communities by sharing learning and mentoring.

We have a very interesting but rather crowded agenda. In the first half we will discuss – in small, chaired breakout groups – some of the current issues facing research and evaluation. In the second half after a short break, you will hear four short presentations on research, and research and evaluation reports.

But let me turn to setting the scene. Our focus today will be communities of place – of geography – and will centre on a type of community development often called asset-based community development, or ABCD short. ABCD refers to an approach in which communities themselves are in control. deciding their priorities, and how to meet those priorities using their strengths. The strengths can be the local people and the connections between them, their buildings or land, and the access they have to services. and the nature of their relationships with external agencies.

The specific purpose of asset-based community development can be varied depending on the assets that a community is building on. For example, it can be creating a Community Land Trust and building affordable housing for the community or creating a social support initiative run with volunteers. However, the overall aim is usually wellbeing – the wellbeing of individuals and the community or the neighbourhood as a whole, making the locality a good place to live. It falls into the category that services call prevention and early intervention – stopping people from becoming ill or delaying the onset of illness.

Those of us steeped in community development, and that probably means everyone in this meeting, have always recognised the value of it and now there is research evidence to prove it. The local authority network New Local has found that substantial benefits can accrue for communities and the public sector if communities are involved in the policy decisions that affect them, or even better if that is extended to collaborative approaches. Communities can also benefit if they are supported to build capacity and are able to own community assets. These approaches can improve individual health and wellbeing, and community resilience and cohesion. They can enhance democratic participation and boost trust. On the service side, they can embed prevention and early intervention and save money.

I want to turn to what I see the current context of research and evaluation, which is understandably dominating everything. We know from experience, and the many research studies, just how devastating the pandemic has been and the massive challenges that face the nation in rebuilding and recovering from it. Jessie Buchanan and Amy Gill have reviewed many of these and the review is available on our website:

[Microsoft Word - 20210205 Knowledge Review TFC.docx \(tfcpembrokeshire.org\)](#)

People have lost friends and loved ones. They've lost jobs and livelihoods; children's education has been affected. People are uncertain about the future – all of which has impacted negatively on mental health. Also, years of austerity and cutbacks to services have compounded the shocking inequalities which are endemic in our society.

On the other hand, community spirit has never been stronger. We are working more closely together and working in new ways, often freed up from bureaucratic processes.

Communities and public- and third-sector organisations are increasingly taking a holistic approach to wellbeing. In Pembrokeshire for example, we have agreed a forward-thinking and exciting 10-Point Plan that includes shortening food, goods and service supply chains and implementing sustainable procurement models that will enhance local economies. There are commitments in the Plan to improving the funding of community groups and about asset transfers to community ownership for sustainable income generation. This will determine the policy research agenda here for the future, and one that will probably be replicated in different parts of Wales.

So evaluation has never been more important and we need better funding for it: whether we are talking about building evaluation into local innovations and other projects or looking across communities to get an understanding of what works where and why. I would argue that this needs an understanding of the complexity of community development – operating as it does most successfully on a small scale, flexibly, with bespoke solutions, and at its own pace – especially if codesigned with external services and agencies. This means that it is inappropriate to rely – at least solely – on counting and looking at scale and efficiencies that are so important to the market-driven processes of the public sector.

Communities have taken centre stage and it is good to see that Building Communities Trust are lobbying the Welsh Government hard to make sure that they stay there.

Going back to the word play in our title for our meeting 'Does it Count?' – yes, communities do because they are crucial for health and wellbeing. Should they be counted – yes, their groups and organisations should be to track their numbers and volunteers. However, in relation to evaluation counting is not enough because the complexity of the context in which interventions take place. Qualitative methods must be included to build full understandings.