



How can we strengthen the evidence base of action on wellbeing in communities of geography?- a Research Project

Together for Change

Summary

The purpose of the research project was to investigate how community organisations reflect on their progress, if they evaluate and how, and what their support needs are to effectively lead and participate in evaluations. Thirty organisations were sampled, weighted to Pembrokeshire. Thirty-two trustees, employees and volunteers were interviewed. All spoke passionately about their mission and the challenges they faced. All gauged their success using informal methods as a minimum. Evaluation designs were determined and limited by the requirement of funders and there was little evidence of coproduction. Although most recognised the importance of evaluating their activities and several were confident with the methods they used, a lack of capacity and capability and workloads frequently prevented adequate time to be devoted to evaluating activities. Despite the considerable barriers facing them, most organisations were receptive to doing more with help and support. Interest was expressed in contact with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), training opportunities, networking and project work. At a strategic level, the results point to action needed by funders and the Welsh Government. In Pembrokeshire, much is already happening to address gaps and support capacity building, but a more structured approach would boost progress. Resources for the task are unevenly spread across public and third sector organisations but a partnership approach will make it possible. The grant from the Regional Integration Fund allocated to TfC was used to launch a newsletter which is a start to that process.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The word 'evidence' has multiple meanings but in this report it is used to mean the *best information or knowledge to inform decision making*. Evaluations provide knowledge on what works and what doesn't, and are needed to inform future actions, policies and funding.
- 1.2 'Wellbeing', a term increasingly used in policies, concerns people's overall quality of life, how well they live. It is determined by the complex interplay of social, cultural, economic, and environmental factors and can be applied to individuals, groups, families and communities as a whole. This complexity poses a considerable challenge for evaluation and there is a lack of consensus on what constitutes evidence on interventions centred on communities and community development.
- 1.3 Improving and maintaining the wellbeing of communities is a concern for all: local and national governments, the third and private sectors, and residents themselves. Policies in Wales consistently highlight the central role of communities in 'creating' health and



wellbeing, a role which is often confusingly referred to as 'prevention'. Communities can achieve much through fostering strong local connections, acquiring assets, and participating in the decisions that affect them. They can be helped to build power which can yield huge benefits in embedding prevention, fostering democratic participation and making cost savings for services (*Community Power: The Evidence; New Local, 2021*).

- 1.4 The pandemic has demonstrated the ability of communities to react quickly and effectively in protecting the health of their residents. The economic crisis and the struggle to deliver public services has further strengthened the importance of their role as partners and collaborators in prevention and early intervention. Research and evaluation are the cornerstone in ensuring that their contributions are maximised.
- 1.5 In Pembrokeshire there is interest in and demand for research and evaluation. Capacity amongst Public Services Board member organisations varies greatly but there is collaboration and coordination through the work of Pembrokeshire Strengthening Community Group (formerly CCRG) to support delivery of the Strengthening Communities Project Plan. This work has raised the profile of the use of the method Most Significant Change in decision making, the sharing of study findings, and led to pilot projects that embed action research in community development. Together for Change has run training courses and recently launched a newsletter which will focus on research and evaluation. Thus, some progress is evident, and awareness is high, but more needs to be done to embed evaluation in routine practice and to link it with policy and practice.
- 1.6 A number of initiatives have started in other parts of Wales to support this area of work. Cardiff University's SPARK led Third Sector Research Partnership Project (TSRP) is linking the research needs of local communities with academic expertise. Swansea University is exploring how the institution can better support communities in research and education. Aberystwyth University would launch (if successful), with partners, the Rural Wales Local Policy and Innovation Partnership (RWLPIP). RWLPIP, if successful, would enhance the use of research and innovation to support policy making, regional development and community resilience on rural Wales.
- 1.7 Developing Evidence Enriched Practice (DEEP), now hosted by Social Care Wales, uses a co-productive approach to gather, explore and use evidence in social care policy and practice. Rural Health and Care Wales, which is a part of Hywel Dda University Health Board, focuses on the development and dissemination of evidence in health and community services. The Resourceful Communities Partnership, currently administered by Social Care Wales, seeks to improve wellbeing in communities of place and includes research and evaluation in its learning events.
- 1.8 The examples above are specific to Wales. It is important also to acknowledge UK wide organisations with a remit in this area of work i.e. the Scottish Community Development Centre; The Young Foundation; the Health Foundation; New Local; and various University collaborations: the N8 Programme, Productive Margins, and The Co(I)laboratory.

2 Funding and aims of the research project

2.1 The research project was funded by Pembrokeshire's allocation from the Regional Integration Fund to inform the development of a support infrastructure for generating and sharing knowledge in Pembrokeshire on wellbeing in communities of place.

2.2 The aims were coproduced with a group of professionals who possess in-depth knowledge of community organisations. The aims were to:

- Understand how communities reflect on meeting their aims and objectives;
- Provide knowledge on the barriers and enablers to undertaking evaluations;
- Identify mechanisms that could help boost the quality and quantity of evidence; and
- Identify any strategic work already taking place in relation to this agenda, in Wales and the UK.

3 Meetings with Policy makers, Researchers and Practitioners (March 2023)

3.1 Three meetings were held involving professionals who work in the area of wellbeing and communities, to discuss gaps in the evidence and how external organisations could work together to support community organisations in research and evaluation. 18 people, working in research, policy and practice were involved in three meetings held online in March 2023. See end of the report for the list of organisations involved.

3.2 There was broad consensus on the following:

1. Evidence is generally lacking particularly in relation to impact.
2. Evaluation is undertaken mostly to meet the requirements of funders. The design of evaluations is mostly driven by funders and can be at odds with the interests and needs of communities.
3. Evaluations are mostly undertaken to justify a case for funding. There is a shortage of knowledge on what doesn't work well.
4. High quality research requires funding and funding is not always available, or available in sufficient quantities.
5. Capacity and capability to undertake research and evaluation is lacking because the emphasis tends to be on delivery.
6. There are insufficient opportunities for sharing knowledge and a lack of time for volunteers and project workers to attend events.

7. There is no national infrastructure in place to drive improvements in research and development in this field, as there is in medical research, although some HEI led infrastructure initiatives are starting to emerge.

4 Research on evidence and community groups and organisations (May – September 2023)

4.1 Method

Semi - structured interviews were undertaken by two researchers. A total of 32 individuals from 30 Wales based community groups and organisations were interviewed. Eight were conducted face to face, 3 by telephone and 21 online. The interviewees all had a thorough overview of their organisations and were therefore well placed to answer questions in detail. The interview started with a question on the role of the interviewees in their organisation, and information on the organisation: *purpose, description of actions, structure, and funding*. This was followed by the questions below:

1. Do you think your project (or organisation) is making a difference?
2. If yes, how do you know it has made a difference?
3. Does your organisation undertake evaluations and if so how?
4. What helps or hinders your organisation in undertaking evaluations?
5. Would anything help your organisation to evaluate and if, so what could help?
6. How do you feel about the future of your organisation?

The community groups interviewed were based in Pembrokeshire (n=19), Ceredigion (n=5), Carmarthenshire (n=5) and Cardiff (n=3).

To be eligible for inclusion in the research project the organisations needed to be in existence and active for at least two years; and have at least two objectives in their strategies concerned with wellbeing.

Initially the community organisations were sampled using info-engine. This was extended to snowball sampling to enable the inclusion of organisations that were excluded from that database and for target recruitment numbers to be reached during the summer period.

All interviewees were offered a donation of £30 to their organisation for their time.

4.2 The organisations and interviewees

- 4.2.1 The interviewees were cofounders, trustees, employees and volunteers. They were responsible for a variety of tasks: management, coordination, administration, funding, marketing and day to day operations. They varied in their motivations and brought rich experience from other sectors to their present work. A common factor

was a passion for being involved in change projects that would make a difference to society.

- 4.2.2 Regarding the community organisations, some had several employees or freelance workers on their books, whereas others relied entirely on volunteers. The legal structures were Community Interest Companies; Community Benefit Societies; social enterprises and registered charities. As to be expected, given the criteria for sampling, many of the organisations were well established and had been running for several years, with one in existence for over 20 years. In contrast, some had been established more recently, that is, within the past four years, with the Covid-19 pandemic acting as a catalyst for start-ups.
- 4.2.3 The organisations relied, in the main, on grant funding. However, a significant proportion did not have any core funding or were unlikely to get continuation funding. Some interviewees noted that they depended heavily on donations (money or goods) and on volunteer workers.

Based on their legal entity type and objectives, some organisations had the freedom to trade. Trading, however, was rarely seen as a financially viable solution for supporting all their work. Those that did not have any external source of funding such as grants, noted that the cofounders themselves contributed significantly to the start up or running costs of the organisation. See the list of organisations involved at the end of the report.

5 Results

5.1 Making a difference

The interviewees spoke passionately and eloquently about their role and the mission of their organisations. Most felt that their organisations were making a positive difference, an assertion which was based on sources such as management data, observation, and informal feedback from community participants or partner organisations.

'People often tell (I) and the Team how much they like the space and how important it is to the community, building a sense of connection for many.'

Success was principally associated with people; their values, ability to adapt and how committed and reliable they were. Good management practices and solid structures were seen as helpful factors. Trustees were singled out as the driving force behind success as was the interest of member of the communities and the skills and experience that they brought to the organisations.

'Amazing staff each year who come back. Excellent charity structure which promotes many activities 'running on rails''

Any threats to success were associated with a lack of funding and a lack of sustainable funding, which were mentioned by over a third of the interviewees. The complex and competitive nature of acquiring funding were seen as sources of stress and barriers to success.

'The future is risky in terms of sustainability. It's hard to have a long-term strategy with short-term funding programmes. You don't know where you'll be and what resources you will have.'

The second most commonly cited barrier to success was the COVID pandemic. Organisations reliant on face-to-face contact faced a significant challenge and were forced to work differently.

Some barriers were unique to individual organisations but the state of the economy and its impact on income generation was of concern for all. The scale of the challenge facing organisations was also palpable. As one interviewee said, *'we can't cure poverty'*. What was clear is that all organisations were tenaciously looking at overcoming barriers whilst recognising the enormity of the challenges they faced.

5.2 Evaluation

The most frequently mentioned sources of data were surveys and management information, collected to meet the reporting requirements of funders. This required counting, and in some instances in relation to targets. Examples included the number of food parcels delivered; investments made; grant funding secured; and local businesses worked with. The reports to funders were often considered 'management data heavy'. The requirements of the National Lottery were considered to be an exception by some. The questionnaires used were either produced internally or were standardised wellbeing surveys.

Although the importance of evaluation was recognised, many organisations were unable to devote adequate resources to thoroughly gauging the impact of their work. The knowledge, experience and skills possessed by teams were seen as being essential, as was the training and advice provided by external agencies. These were not always possessed or available. Established frameworks and templates created internally by organisations were also felt to be essential.

'PAVS ran a workshop where they explained how to apply for funding, the formula and how to report. This was very helpful.'

The expectations of funders played a major part in how evaluations were conducted with the National Lottery being singled out for being realistic and understanding and leaving space for evaluations to be planned for locally.

The barriers to thorough formal evaluations being undertaken were profound with significant variance in the scope and scale achieved by different organisations. A lack of

internal capacity and capability all played a part as did the unhelpful timescales of short-term funding and workloads.

'Evaluation needs to be undertaken across several years, but funding timescales don't allow for this. How do we resource reflection over long timescales?'

5.3 The Future – what would help?

Three themes were identified from the responses:

1. *Training on methods of evaluation.* Skills in evaluation were often learned 'on the job' by individuals tasked with the responsibility. It was felt that training needed to be spread across teams to build knowledge, understanding and capacity.
2. *Collaborating with other community groups.* Sharing learning and networking were identified as areas of interest, although not all saw collaborating as being viable given current workloads. Nevertheless, the majority of organisations mentioned an interest in participating in projects involving practical research.
3. *Linking with HEIs.* Some of the organisations which had experience in this area felt that HEIs brought new ideas and learning from which they could benefit. The learning was wide ranging and could include improvements on organisational structures and the collection of monitoring data.

General reflections on the future highlighted concerns over funding, succession planning and recruitment, all of which were likely to impact on sustainability. However, these concerns were tempered by an overall positive outlook on the future.

6 Issues raised

6.1 The purpose of this research project was not to judge organisations on whether they undertook evaluations, nor was it to comment on the methods they used. However, it should be noted that the methods used to evaluate were narrow and mostly limited to the gathering of management and survey data, neither of which can give a full and meaningful overview of an organisation's impact. These limitations were influenced by the requirements of many funders, a lack of coproduction, the short-term nature of funding, and a lack of capacity and capability coupled with the sheer size of workloads. Many of the organisations involved in this study understood the value of evaluation but were not in a position or given the opportunity to shape the evaluation designs that would meet their needs.

6.2 The number of organisations researched was small. However, given their diversity and longevity, and the strong similarity found between the research and outcomes of the discussion groups, we can say with some confidence that the findings are at least generalisable to Pembrokeshire and West Wales.

6.3 The following would be useful to improve the situation:

1. All funders should take steps to ensure that they coproduce evaluation designs to meet the needs of community organisations and not just their own.
2. Funding agreements should include sufficient resources for evaluations to be undertaken.
3. Welsh Government should track the developing infrastructure centred around HEIs in Wales and review the effectiveness of the different emerging support models.
4. Welsh Government should provide incentives for collaboration between the HEIs involved into this area of work.
5. There is some work to be done on bringing clarity to this complex area with respect to frameworks, data, indicators and evaluation designs.
6. Support should be provided for community organisations to build capacity and capability in research and evaluation. Some headway has been made on this in Pembrokeshire.
7. A structured approach is needed to build learning networks, but in a way that meets the practical needs of community organisations.

(1- 4 report to be shared through electronic copies and presentations; 5 RWLPIP (if successful) to make a start; 6 and 7 Together for Change to take forward with partners in the region)

With thanks to:

Organisations that participated in the meetings: BCT, Bevan Commission, Coalfields Regeneration Trust, Cwmpas, Nesta, Pembrokeshire County Council, Rural Health and Care Wales, Social Care Wales, SPARK Cardiff University, Swansea University, WCVA, Welsh Government

Organisations that participated at the interview stage: Ace, Borth, Burry Port Family Centre, Caeriad, Care and Repair, COCA, Cwm Arian, Dash Ceredigion, East Community Hall, Friday Venue, Friends of the Mount, Gentle Radical, Grange, Haverhub, Llanrhian Connected Community, Nature Wise Ceredigion, Old Mill Foundation, Patch, Plant Dewi Pembrokeshire, Small Woods, Small World Theatre, Solva Care, Solva CLT, SPAN Arts, Tir Coed, West Wales Woods

County Voluntary Councils: in Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire and Ceredigion

Associate Dave Horton who helped with data collection and the drafting of the report