Building Community Capacity:

Reporting the Results

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1. Introduction

Initiatives to Build Community Capacity (BCC) in support of social care transformation can take many forms. But normally they will be under-pinned by something like the thinking shown in figure 1 below. This sets out a flow of possible outcomes, showing how, if BCC initiatives lead to vulnerable adults being better connected socially, a suite of direct and indirect benefits may arise – including, quite possibly, long-term cost reductions that more than offset the initial investment.

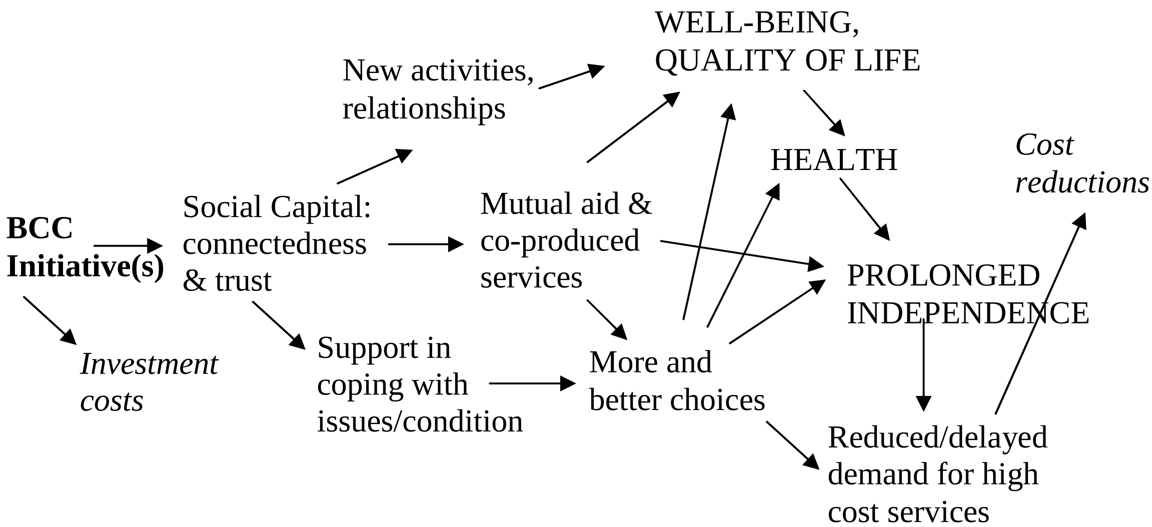

Figure 1: A general model of the ways that building community capacity may increase well-being and save scare resources.

Ah, but will these benefits *really* follow? How often and to what extent? And will they be worth the investment? How would we know?...These are knotty questions and one use of the diagram is to suggest where we might look for information to provide the answers. Because this version is so general, it will help to prepare a much more specific and 'local' diagram to show the intended benefits from one or more BCC initiatives, and how they may arise. This makes the thinking behind particular BCC initiatives explicit.

This chapter offers some pointers for tackling these knotty questions - assuming that you have thought through the logic of your BCC initiative in something like this way. It draws on the experience of activists from the BCC learning community[1] especially those who shared their measurement and reporting practices in a workshop in 2010.

Through that workshop it became apparent that four broad approaches to the measurement challenge are being followed (and blended) within the BCC Learning Community (see figure 2). Most of this chapter explores what these four different approaches involve, and their advantages and disadvantages in each case. However, before launching into that discussion and then drawing out some pointers for future practice, its worth taking a brief 'reality check' on what it is reasonable to expect from measurement in this sort of context.

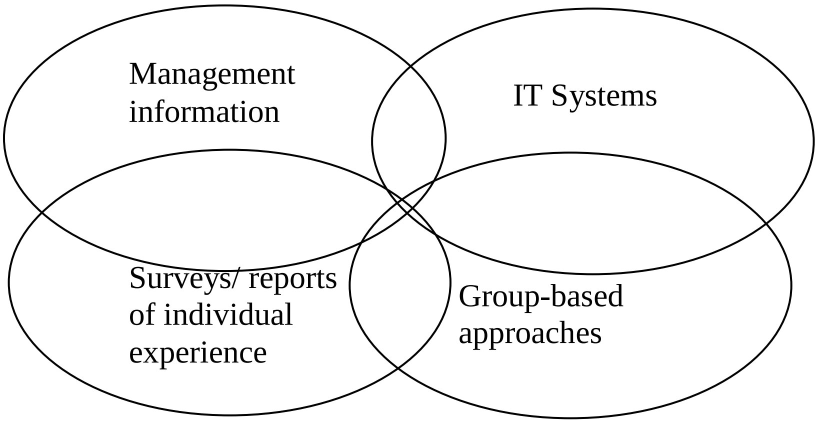

Figure 2: Four broad approaches to gauging results

2. Measurement and reporting – what's actually *practical*?

Two issues bedevil work in this area. The first arises from the fact that 'soft concepts' – like social capital, co-production and well-being – are used to express key ideas and outcomes of interest. Anyone unfamiliar with these terms, and with social science ideas more generally, is bound to find these difficult initially. Different people define such terms in different ways, and anyway these definitions will often include other soft and hard-to-measure concepts (trust, connectedness). What do we really mean, for heaven's sake?

Happily, this difficulty is usually temporary. In fact, we all use soft concepts the whole time: if you pause to examine them, terms like the 'public sector', 'bureaucracy,' 'quality' and 'satisfaction,' have very fuzzy boundaries and may be defined in different ways by different people according to their purposes. But we are familiar with these terms, so we generally understand what people mean when they use them. If someone has a more specific meaning in mind they will generally say so, and provide a definition for that purpose. So as we become familiar with the new concepts (and start to recognise how they can be over-extended or misused), we cease to worry about quite which is the correct definition, and become more confident in choosing one, or indeed making one up, to suit our purposes and situation.

But this then raises the second, and *much* tougher issue – the difficulties involved in devising reliable indicators for these multi-dimensional concepts. *In principle*, this is always possible– just commit enough money to social researchers for long enough and they will devise reliable measures. But in terms of practical management information systems, that is irrelevant. The dilemma here is acute: sound information to inform what may be controversial decisions is vital; but the more one spends on evaluation, the less there is for the services themselves. Figure 4 represents this dilemma as a search for methods that are timely, cheap, prompt and non-intrusive, and at the same time valid and reliable.

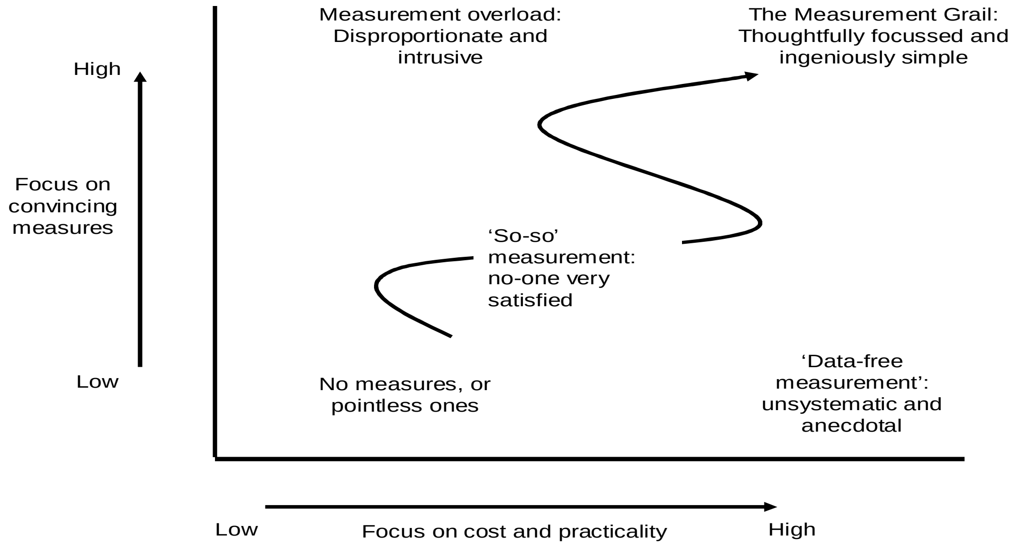

Figure 4: The measurement dilemma

In fact, this is only one of several dilemmas involved in measuring social outcomes that mean much textbook advice simply cannot be carried through in practice[2]. It follows that the best anyone can hope for is to put together a few 'good enough' measures and reporting methods. These can usefully inform judgements without wasting resources, and above all *they will allow you to ask better questions and have a better discussion with those involved*. But such practical measures and reporting methods will not provide answers. For example, even if one found indications of benefits right the way through the 'flow' shown in figure 1, sceptical questions could still be asked: how much would have happened anyway, if there had been no intervention? Has cultivating social capital in this way, drawn energy away from elsewhere? What was the opportunity cost?.... and so on.

So it is a matter of travelling hopefully, and with openness to the range of possibilities. The uncertainty may be uncomfortable, but you simply will not and cannot know for sure.

3. Using routine management information

Many BCC initiatives are funded through contracts or partnership arrangements and these have their own, often elaborate, monitoring systems. This means that whoever is managing a BCC initiative will have to report on progress and expenditure. How might this help in answering questions about outcomes and value-for-money? One way is obvious and important – it can help answer questions about how much the BCC initiative cost. A second use for this information is in understanding *how* a BCC initiative is working. Perhaps a project will have information from another source – an evaluator, say - on outcomes, and these will be found to vary between settings. In such cases management information on activity levels, uptake, and so on, may help in explaining why the scheme worked better in one place than another.

Finally, routine management information can sometimes help in capturing softer outcomes. The difficulty is that most management information is designed to answer the question ‘are we doing what we said we would do?’ - in terms of activities, levels of spend, numbers, timescales, and so on. Some indicators of quality and outcomes may be included – for example, Brighton and Hove’s Contract Unit asks Providers for the number and percentage of certain responses to questions in users or carers feedback forms. But the longer-term effects of new arrangements for peoples’ lives. may not arise straight away – let alone be noticed and reported immediately by those involved. So attempting to gather this on a routine basis risks making the reporting burdensome and intrusive - with any information gained of poor quality (just more ‘feeding the beast’). Nevertheless, one can sometimes include simple, unobtrusive indicators of beneficial outcomes in routine reporting, so it’s important to keep this possibility in mind.

4. Using advanced IT-based systems

Electronic record-keeping is increasingly widespread and the tools to assist front-line staff with easily capturing relevant observations in a range of forms are getting better and better[3]. But modern IT systems also offer the prospect of combining information from different sources in ways that allow a broader and deeper understanding of the workings and outcomes of social interventions – see figure 3. The basic idea here is sound, even compelling: the information has already been gathered and stored electronically; the technological tools for combining and analysing it become cheaper and more powerful every year. So the scope for understanding ‘what works’ is increasing steadily.

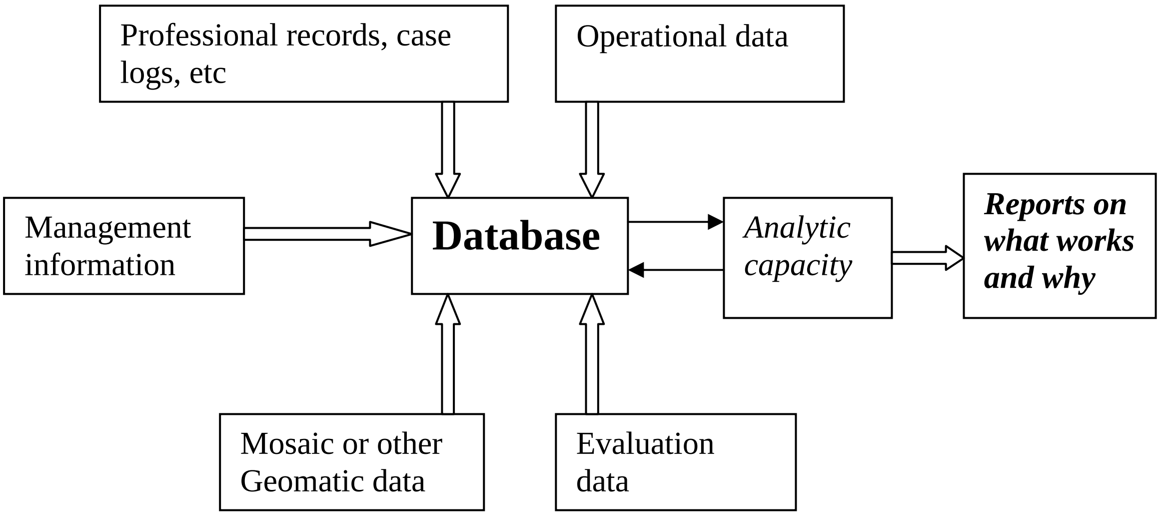

Figure 3: Data integration possibilities of modern IT systems

York, Hartlepool and Lancashire are among the Local Authorities represented in the BCC Learning Community who are in different ways exploring these possibilities. Their experience is valuable for showing some of the challenges associated with these approaches as well as their benefits. This does not mean they are attempting to integrate all the possible data sources suggested in figure 3 at the same time, of course! Different projects have different information needs and possibilities.

Lancashire County Council uses a number of databases to gather information about communities and support commissioning decision-making. Data sources utilised by the council include customer databases, Mosaic and the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. The core data set is now available via the Lancashire Profile website and updated on a continual basis by the intelligence teams from each partner organisation. Partner organisations all have ready access to the data to allow them to produce plans that are relevant to their own populations.

Two key issues for this approach are:

- *Confidentiality.* It might not seem *too* difficult to create aggregate or anonymous data from confidential professional records so that it can become part of a more comprehensive dataset. But if such information is combined with Geomatic data it may then be possible for the location of 'anonymous' cases to be pinpointed rather precisely

- *Analytic capability.* Combining different sources of data is only the start; the work involved in analysing it is even more demanding. Two things may be needed: one is a gradual upgrade in the 'numeracy' of staff working on policy development – so they are able to use of the information becoming available. The other is access to social research expertise. However this is provided – whether in-house, bought-in, or through collaboration with a local university[4] – that person will require guidance on the questions to explore, and that really means regular exchanges with the decision-makers for whom findings from the analysis matter.

Despite these and other issues, the use of advanced IT systems is clearly the underlying direction of travel for social performance measurement. That doesn't mean one should try to hurry things along: the dangers of grand technocratic schemes – which, even if they work, turn out expensive and inflexible - are as real as ever. Manageable next steps to help address known issues are the way forward.

5. Surveys and reports of individual observations and experience

With empowerment and enhanced wellbeing as intended outcomes, its hardly surprising that the reported experience and observation of those most directly involved feature prominently in attempts to establish the results of BCC initiatives. Some commission evaluators to gather this information. As always, the challenge is to generate meaningful, additional information without undue expense or intrusion – given that survey design is not straightforward, survey administration and analysis can both be time-consuming, and the interpretation of results problematic.

Projects run by members of the learning community are tackling these challenges in interesting ways:

- *Developing standard questionnaire items*. In Control are working with Lancaster University to devise some simple question formats to gather co-ordinated responses from staff, carers and service users regarding self-directed support. Adopting proven question formats makes questionnaire design easier and increases the reliability and comparability of the information gathered. When machine-readable forms are used, the processing is easier and quicker

- *Outcomes stories*. As part of its monitoring process, Dorset POPP asks projects for brief accounts of how particular individuals have benefitted from the project. Follow-up calls to a sample of Wayfinder enquirers are also used to generate brief accounts of the difference Wayfinder advice has made. An evaluation steering group categorizes these stories in terms of the number of outcome areas involved and how they have come about. With more than 100 stories a year, useful quantitative analysis is possible. A real merit of this approach is the way it engages individuals allowing them to report in their own terms. The downsides are the time it requires (though this time is highly informative) and sometimes the lack of detail that might help with cost-benefit judgements

- *Peer-to-peer research*. Turning Point are enthusiastic advocates of this approach (contact Gemma Bruce) – even though it does require some initial training and on-going support for community members who take on the challenge. It brings a freshness and realism to research, seems to encourage candid and considered responses, can be part of the community-building process, and is relatively low cost

- *Before-and-after Outcome Stars* - http://www.outcomesstarsystem.org.uk/ . The neat idea here is the simple visual representation, plus the use of standard items and scales allowing comparability. They can be a useful part of support planning and review. Some of the usual downsides still apply, of course - they can be time-intensive, response biases may be unavoidable, and they do not show changes in context that may have been crucial.

6. Working with and through groups

Focus groups, originally devised for market research, are now being used much more widely. They are a way, not just of gathering views but of coming to understand why participants have come to hold those views, and what they mean by particular comments or responses. Arguably, group-based approaches may be particularly appropriate for BCC initiatives.

Often, we know what we think when we hear what we say – we formulate our views through reflective discussions with others, weighing pros and cons, taking account of alternative perspectives, perhaps going beyond initial reactions. This is everyday, social 'making sense-of-experience'. However, for many vulnerable adults, social isolation is a recurring issue (hence community-building is both a means and an end for many initiatives). That being the case, asking individuals summarily to report and share their experience through, eg, a survey, has definite limitations as a way of establishing what has really changed in their lives and how they value it. If my life is difficult and offers limited opportunity for social interaction, I may not be clear what I think about new arrangements and possibilities. I can always answer questions, of course – perhaps in socially acceptable ways, or perhaps by expressing a particular frustration. But neither is the same as formulating a considered view.

Such considerations mean that group-based approaches to evaluation can have a strong theoretical justification – as well as offering potential cost advantages and perhaps even some scope for consolidating relationships in a network or community. On the downside, facilitating a focus group to draw out and sympathetically uphold a range of views and experiences, while those involved clarify their own thinking, requires skill and experience. And it's important to consider any parts of the community who are missing from the composition of the group.

7. Useful pointers and principles

Every project is different and needs its own reporting arrangements. That said, participants in the workshop agreed that some principles had wide application and would always be worth bearing in mind:

- Wherever it is practical and affordable, use a mix of methods or draw on information from different sources. Some people are convinced by figures – others want the compelling story. A combination of different types of information is usually more informative and convincing than heavy reliance on a single method

- Integrate data-gathering and processing into the real work, wherever possible – so that it contributes to the BCC process. Far from being 'slanted', such user-generated information may be far more honest and informative than the perfunctory responses of expensively administered surveys

- Don't forget the politics! – measurement and reporting is always part of a relationship, it is one way of staying in touch either with those one funds and manages, or with one's funders or boss. The measures and reports can contribute to those relationships – providing the basis for a better informed dialogue - but can never substitute for them. Wherever possible, arrange occasions for visits so you, or your bosses/funders can see and hear at first hand, what is going on, and make plain any concerns and doubts you or they have. This cannot solve or prevent all problems – but it should reduce the number of misconceptions and nasty surprises!

8. Further information

See the forthcoming guide to evaluation, *Does it Work? A planning tool and checklist for building community connections*, due to be published by the Think Local Act Personal Partnership.

Read more at http://www.thinklocalactpersonal.org.uk/BCC/EvidenceAndEvaluation

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[1] We gratefully acknowledge the time and assistance of members of the Building Community capacity learning network

[2] For example: according to the text books, the measures should be comprehensive lest they distort behaviour – but they should also be focussed on a limited number of key goals. They should be stable to allow comparisons with previous periods, analysis and learning; but they must also be strategically aligned which means constant updating… and so on. For a fuller discussion see Paton (2003) *Managing and Measuring Social Enterprises* SAGE

[3] As an example, see 'Views' the Programme Reporting System developed by Substance– information is available at http://www.views.coop

[4] Knowledge Transfer Partnerships provide one mechanism for engaging such support - see http://www.ktponline.org.uk/business/business.aspx

Collaborative studentships are another vehicle for partnership – an academic, or university department, with the interests and expertise you seek will give more information. Or visit: http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/funding-opportunities/2344/CASE_studentships_.aspx