

Children & Young People Now

Using young people's stories to gather evidence and show impact

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How does a charity with a history of meeting the needs of young people in deprived communities adapt how it works to gather evidence of impact? Here's how Sporting Communities tackled this.



Evidence of outcomes would often be recorded anecdotally with no scientific data. Picture: Gorynvd/Adobe Stock



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Sporting Communities is an ethical not-for-profit organisation that provides a broad range of children and young people's services which fall into the category of "community development". At the heart of our work is the supporting of local people and communities in overcoming their immediate challenges, raising aspirations, and inspiring people to be the change makers we so desperately need.

We began our journey more than 50 years ago in Stoke-on-Trent as a local charity called Hanley Youth Project serving the community's needs. Like many small charities, both then and today, we operated hand to mouth, often sacrificing personal growth and development to ensure that the people we serve came first. Working in highly deprived neighbourhoods, the demands on our services were constant and the time reacting to a barrage of local issues occupied every waking hour, leaving very little time to reflect, only to react.

In the 1970s and 80s deprivation and poverty were omnipresent – sadly, a trend we see re-emerging today. The necessity to respond to need, particular with regard to children and families, was acute and therefore a priority. There was no time to set aside, nor spare funding, to assess and measure the impact of the work, because the next caseload of issues was pressing and every penny counted. It felt – and looked – like a continual human tsunami of demand and reaction.

Our impact then

The impact of the charity was clear: once the work was achieved, the issues lessened due to the dedication and commitment of nuanced worker relationships based on trust. Nurturing fragile community interactions became the most effective tool in moving people to a better place where they cope with what life throws at them. It was unthinkable at the time to then take that trust, dismantle it by forensically collecting and scrutinising data formally. It would have tainted the delicate relationships formed and reversed the work forever, damaging any future intervention later, a very poor and costly outcome for all concerned.

The people we focused on were casualties of poverty, scarred by society and often in conflict with institutions. Because of our egalitarian approach and philosophy, we were welcomed in by the community. To impose an act of measurement would have been interpreted as taking something from the community without consent, almost as a form of betrayal. The actual evidence of outcomes would often be recorded anecdotally with no scientific measurement or theory of change. Being embedded within communities ourselves we lived through that change and that "lived experience" became a valuable currency all of its own. Storytelling of challenging times and overcoming strife was accepted urban folklore, "owned by the people" as their own authentic historic account of overcoming that struggle.

Gathering evidence

So, fast forwarding to the present day, how do we at Sporting Communities balance the relationships and trust of communities we serve, with the demand by commissioners and authority bodies for accountable evidence and measurable data of impact?

We understand implicitly when equating data formula to objects and products its easily quantifiable but applying that same thought process or scientific rule of thumb proves to be

more problematic and challenging when applied to the human condition and especially when the funding is limited but the expectation for outcomes is disproportionately high.

Undaunted by this, we recognised early on that learning from practice was imperative. We began to focus on evidence in more detail in the mid to late 1990s, however, we had concluded from the very beginning, at the root of everything was factual storytelling.

This was the time when the charity became absorbed into the local authority and the philosophy of how we worked in communities became accepted – a leap of faith by the local authority at that time.

It was a seminal moment. The stabilisation of the organisation allowed us to allocate qualitative time to reflect on the practices and record outcomes, and this gradually became the accepted practice of the organisation. We started to look how the learning could be placed on public record officially and eventually employed the expertise of Loughborough University, working alongside our team of detached sports youth workers to capture the work and look at the impact of the practice through a critical and analytical lens.

Drawing on more than a year's worth of case study interviews, the researchers published a detailed account of those nuanced stories. Capturing these in an academic paper was important for us.

This was the beginning of our thought process surrounding how we capture the trigger points of change, and demonstrated clear impact, so commissioners and governmental officials could be reassured that a quasi-scientific formulaic approach blended with storytelling gave a more in-depth evidence base of what outcomes looked like.

Refining our measures

Over the course of the past 12 years, we have systematically developed an armoury of measurement tools and resources which look beyond the obvious hard data into the softer outcomes where often the story of change starts to emerge. Gantt charts, logic models, social return on investment calculations, infographics, TOMs [themes outcomes and measures] social value reporting are all very effective in collating and tracking inputs and outcomes – deployed discerningly – to arrive at the most accurate of accounts. Academia however is our empirical narrative of choice, so we have made it mandatory to have our work recorded in such a way, so it becomes enshrined within research archives and accessible to all.

The challenge the sector has is with the present culture of how local and regional commissioning is focused on the distribution of small amounts of temporary funding. This attempt to apply a sticking plaster approach to address complex issues such as crime and social change can derail progress. It could exacerbate an already disparate situation through the raising of community expectations – although welcomed by the community it invariably is not sustainable and the money a pitiful investment, adding to the cycle of mistrust and disconnection.

So, the most authentic evidence of change we can rely on is what we can see with our own eyes, and what we can hear from recipients' experiences. Storytelling and fact blended into a format of academic independent scrutiny, case study interviews and digital recordings on film, recounting personal journeys and most impotent of all capturing the

nebulous evidence of “feelings” are all necessary tools to harness the real difference that investment of public money can make.

To illustrate this, I recently had the privilege to write an article capturing the journey of our work over those 50 years in honour of those past and present workers (see further reading). What I naively didn't expect was a response by the public. Yet, randomly, one reader contacted the editorial team and told his side of the story.

Pictured in the article as a child in the 1970s, this man, now in his late 50s, explained that when he saw the picture of himself and then read the content of the article, he wanted to add the emotional context of how the guidance and the support of the workers changed his and his siblings' lives. He paid homage to the youth workers, their compassion, care, and influence and how this attributed to their life out of poverty into successful leadership roles. It reminded him – and it reminds us – of the importance of relationships.

Impact beyond formular

There doesn't exist a formular that maps longitudinal impact surrounding human connection at present. Like many professions such as teachers, advisers, and mentors, their legacy and influence are indelible marks carried with the young person throughout their life as a subliminal subconscious guide, punctuating their thoughts and values.

The real impact or outcomes everyone is searching for sometimes cannot be measured in formal or scientific terms. Therefore, are we relegated to accepting the status quo as the only way forward? The inherent dangers are that we have no methodology of collating that learning from longitudinal impact, so we are consigned forever to our fate, the wheels being forever reinvented as the next commissioner comes up with a new idea for a service which is in fact an old idea resurrected without any learning attached?

Do we need to look at another method of collecting the evidence and measuring the difference? Is blind faith our only option, or do we continue to give consent to commissioners to continue to erratically shoot from the lost evidence hip, hoping to hit the target? We at Sporting Communities have innovative ideas and solutions, but it would take investment of courage from the “powerbrokers” to make that cultural move away from the accepted norm. It would, however, represent a paradigm shift and present an opportunity for progress that could prove to be the best cost-benefit investment in change that public money can buy.

- Resilient communities from contextualsafeguarding.org.uk/blog/resilient-communities/

CYP NOW CONFERENCE

- Ross Podyma will be speaking at CYP Now's Evidence, Evaluation and Impact conference on 29 March evaluationconference.co.uk/evaluationevidenceimpact2023/en/page/home

Click here to read more in CYP Now's Evaluating Impact special report