Better for everyone

Better Together Policy Forum

County Durham Evidence Base - Finding Common Ground

Introduction

This event at Bowburn Community Centre on Friday 6th October 2023 was held for partners to consider whether there is an evidence base in County Durham that is informed by all those working to support the wider determinants of health of our communities.

Many organisations across the VCS sector are engaged in research or are seeking or receiving funding for 'research and engagement'. DCA are engaged with a national programme underpinned by the Young Foundation report on ''An equitable future for research and innovation'':

Durham County Council is committed to an assets-based approach to engagement, insight and research activity in order to better understand the needs of communities. The County Durham Partnership made a commitment to designing public services so that they prevent high volumes of needs and demand for statutory services.

Academics have been working together across the region to shape research outcomes that support policy development for many years and Durham University has long explored the opportunities to broaden the evidence base by taking an inclusive approach through the mix of different research methodologies.

Forum Event

The October Policy Forum was designed to bring these three sectors together and Kate Burrows, Executive Director Durham Community Action, and Chair of Better Together VCS Forum, introduced the topic of the day. She invited participants to consider the key questions: are we building an evidence base for County Durham that is informed by all those working to support the wider determinant of health of our communities; what is that evidence base and, does that partnership working build a fully inclusive insight to inform decision making?

A further introduction was made by Rebekka Shenfine, Public Health Speciality Registrar, who spoke about the platforms providing the current evidence base.   .

1. **Research – informed policy and practice – and understanding hidden experiences**
   Dr Britta Taylor, Policy Engagement Manager, Durham University

   Britta gave a brief presentation on the need for policy and practice informed research and touching upon the need for a research broker to share the research information between the policy makers and the practitioners.

2. **A Researchers' perspective**
   Evelyn Tehrani, Senior Manager, Research & Engagement, Durham University

   Evelyn gave a presentation on the importance of collaborative and co-produced research.

Any organisation with a health and wellbeing focus and are interested in learning about the Creative Facilitation training that Evelyn mentioned in her presentation should email creativefacilitationunit@durham.ac.uk.

3. **Narrative Practices Lab**
Dr Laura Mazzoli-Smith, Associate Professor, Durham University Institute for Medical Humanities

Laura gave a presentation on the importance of capturing the narratives in healthcare and shared a video which highlighted the journey of someone supporting a family member with Alzheimers, which was particularly moving.

The video, presentation and additional stories are included in the presentation below.

Anyone who wishes to sign up to the Durham University Institute to Medical Humanities newsletter can do so with this link.

4. **Durham Insight – what is the evidence base?**
Michael Flemming, Research & Public Health Intelligence Manager, Durham County Council

Michael gave a very informative presentation using a live link to Durham Insight and explained how the website can provide data to inform service delivery. An additional element to the site on the Durham Index of Need (DION) is about to go live in the next few weeks and is particularly informative as it captures multiple indicators of health and vulnerability and builds a more informative picture of the needs of individual communities at a lower super output level.

Roundtable Discussion
Participants were invited to consider three questions. Key messages are summarised below:

Question 1: How do we build an inclusive evidence base for County Durham?

- **What are the opportunities for research connections?**
  - Multiple organisations already carrying out their research at a local level e.g. Pioneering Care Partnership, Age UK, North East Youth, County Durham Sport, etc.
  - VCS partners can provide stories and the qualitative data through their day-to-day service delivery.
  - To 'make it real' through the production of videos and stories that capture the lived experience voice. When the data is small the individual stories are powerful. Additionally, there is an opportunity to capture comments from the videos e.g. Youtube.
  - Bring decision makers 'to the coal face' and for organisations to step into each other's shoes.
  - Share resources better "you are doing that research – can I utilise it". A better understanding of intellectual property rights is required for this to happen effectively.
  - Use modern technology and more modern techniques to capture the data.
  - Provide a framework and structure for research collected by the VCS and record the impact of the organisations to develop a 'what works' approach.
  - Networking events.

- **What are the barriers to building better research links (what gets in the way?)**
  - Funding - having the time and capacity/resources (both financial and human) is the overwhelming message.
  - Funding is often specific and VCS organisations compete for the funding. This can lead to a reluctance to share good practice.
  - Mapping what is there and looking at how organisations connect. A shared understanding of what is available would make life easier and ease the burden of 'silo' working because organisations are too busy 'doing the doing'. It would enable the VCS to understand what data and knowledge is already available.
  - There is apathy and disappointment from over research and not being listened to

- o Different platforms don't integrate. Can RADAR (patient safety software) link to Durham Insight?
- o Providing emotional/mental health support whilst conducting research (for researchers).
- o Accessibility – the need to address digital exclusion, use the right language and attitude, recognising the embarrassment and stigma often faced by those who need help and preventing the 'hard to reach' falling through the gaps.

- **What does 'good' look like in terms of engagement in research from the many different VCS sector perspectives?**
  - o Research which is longitudinal and well-resourced that can identify both issues and solutions (and in linked to funding to delivering the solutions)
  - o Research which is updated regularly producing timely data (referred to a project previously led by IPSOS) which is clear and easily understood.
  - o Research which is centralised. Could the Community Book provide a repository or something through Advice in County Durham? Many comments focussed on where data is stored and whether it was accessible to everyone.
  - o Research with robust measures and is credible; that considers the people giving the information and captures a wide range of voices - who need to know that this is going to make a difference.
  - o Research which is person centred, rather than funder outcome driven.
  - o Training should be provided to VCS organisations on how to gather the evidence, which could lead to an accreditation for organisations who are inclusive in research.
  - o Managing expectations of research to capture the right voices using the right approach and a wide approach. No research about us, without us
  - o Research which builds on good practice examples.

Question 2: What should we be tackling together?

- **What would be meaningful?**
  - o Capturing narrative and timing into data – use of Artificial Intelligence
  - o Good planning and putting things into place at the start of research developing, involving the right organisations and giving local people the opportunity to have a strong voice - which is responded to.
  - o Questions capturing data at a very local level, which have been developed with input from the whole community. Potential to capture this through local events.
  - o Using panels of people with lived experiences e.g. parent/carer forum in Family Hub planning – led by someone directly involved.
  - o Meaningful use of reports – what can we change through research?
  - o Data which provides a holistic view of the whole picture to enable better understanding.
  - o Capturing valuable data. Story based evidence and research is more likely to be reliable.
  - o The use of cost benefit analysis to look at how certain interventions can reduce costs.
  - o Research that is available in accessible formats.
  - o Enabling young people to do their own research and capturing the diversity of voices of the young people.
  - o Sustainable support of VCS organisations who can provide a constant evidence base.

- **Evidence to demonstrate needs/gaps/impact?**
  - o Measures need to be appropriate locally e.g. poverty measures don't work in rural areas to reflect the reality of poverty.
  - o Tackling inwork poverty – there is a stigma for people to ask for help – what are we doing to support them?
  - o Young people's voices aren't being heard, we need to listen and take action which is demonstrable.

- We need to re-examine the way that things are measured. Data could be measured in a number of ways which would remove 'single threshold barriers' preventing people from accessing the support they need.
- System level needs to be aware of what is going on a ground level.
- Using data at a geographical area e.g. health data from GP appointments which identify loneliness or conversations with social prescribers. Use of foodbanks or the prevalence of fast-food shops/deliveries.
- Use open access groups and sit and chat opportunities.
- Sharing research from other areas and using the relevant bits. Drawing down what has worked.

Question 3: What might your organisation be able to offer

- **What research or gathering of insight is already happening?**
  - Community Research Network
  - Advice in County Durham are already looking at how we are supporting those on benefits/those with additional needs.
  - Durham University and Museums Association - going into the community to reach the people in need
  - NE Youth are mapping all of youth working going on with aim of signposting to other organisations in the area
  - Citizens Advice – all work is evidence based – good collection of client stories and data set but need to reach the geographical gaps.
  - VCSE can offer information on the number of users already accessing services

- **What are we not capturing the research potential of and who would/could facilitate this?**
  - "Hidden" people – e.g. people who are housebound, people geographically isolated - use organisations who are linked to "hidden" communities and hidden experiences.
  - VCSE needs to be feeding into data more as they have the 'ground level' knowledge
  - Collection of data of resilience work.
  - How do we mesh all of the support organisations together to capture the needs of the individual?
  - The needs of young people who fall though the gaps outside of the mainstream education system – e.g. those in exclusion. Use those organisations that support them e.g. Foundation for Good.
  - Are the voices of young people being heard effectively – adapt the way of asking and involve those being asked.
  - Those who are not accessing services but need the support – how do we reach them?
  - Research potential – how do you know who to approach and where is the funding held?

- **What development opportunities/capacity building might be useful?**
  - PCC – trained police officers to have empathy in specific thematic areas to improve their response – people delivering training need to be informed, have better research too
  - Engagement of volunteers to support the VCS organisations carry out the research side leaving the staff to do the delivery side
  - Training in methods of data collection, capacity building and the guidance and structure to facilitate
  - Promoting what is working and funding it to continue.
  - Promotion of research at a local level
  - Sharing of research by VCS organisations – coming together regularly i.e. network scenario
  - We need to utilise the skills/knowledge of the 'best placed person' to capture the best impact/lived experience.
  - Relationship building with people in departments and VCS organisations e.g. Poverty Truth Commissioners.

o   Reaching out to individuals and organisations (combined effort)

Key messages from VCS to Commissioners
- Talk to us, involve us, help us jointly develop research and share our insights
- Research needs to be sustainable and well resourced – and the solutions do too.
- Long term mechanism to gather our research and insight, with development of existing rather than of new to avoid duplication.
- Accessibility – make sure all voices are heard.
- Don't always go for the larger charities – small ones often have a deeper local reach.
- Large Government rolled out programmes – the community isn't asked what/how it would work best.
- Make sure research is transparent and meaningful/purposeful with clear aims and information on what is needed and how the VCS can contribute.
- Keep inspiring us – share models and learning on what works and what doesn't.
- Data need to include stories.
- No research about us without us.
- Use the right language and provide the funded time for the VCS to support/conduct the research

Key messages from Commissioners for the VCS
- We need to be around the table to work in partnership, particularly for joint research applications
- Share your ideas and help us to know where we need to be.
- Events like the Better Together Policy Forum are a great platform for sharing information.
- Keep the dialogue going.
- Show the true picture rather than one to meet funders objectives

Next Steps

- Continue open discussions – it's clear that there is a desire to work better together and build on opportunities to learn from one another. We must always be careful not to destabilise existing work that delivers well for our communities but exploring opportunities to develop an inclusive and accessible 'knowledge base' which takes account of all aspects of the 'research system' could ignite further collaboration.
- Shape and develop appropriate collaborative programmes of work (including training and funding packages) to support the implementation of research initiatives and activities that gather insight (assuring local voices are heard) to influence strategic policy decisions and inform the design of interventions from an inclusive evidence base.
- Together, take opportunities to build on existing and emerging 'frameworks' and research activities across the County with the aim of building a 'network' within which ideas, knowledge and insight can be exchanged.
- Above all, shape suitable opportunities to take forward and build on the issues raised at the conference through the Better Together VCS Forum in order to continue to influence and inform future policy and service developments for our communities.

About the Forum

The Better Together Forum brings together senior representatives of larger or specialist VCS organisations with a countywide remit to share best practice and look for new opportunities to collaborate.

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