

CENTRE FOR EFFECTIVE SERVICES



Connecting science, policy and practice to improve outcomes for children and communities

Effective Community Development Programmes

An executive summary from a review of the international evidence

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Background to the Review project

The Centre for Effective Services (CES) is an independent organisation set up in 2008 by the Irish government in partnership with the Atlantic Philanthropies. The aim of the Centre is to promote evidence-based policy and practice in child, family and community services. The Centre works across the island of Ireland to provide or procure scientific and technical support of various kinds to community-based services and those who plan and commission them, in a field that is becoming known across the world as 'implementation science'.

Shortly after the Centre became operational in autumn 2008, the new team was asked by the Department for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs (D.CRAGA), to carry out a review project to inform thinking on two important community development programmes in Ireland, the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) and the Community Development Programme (CDP). The review project was designed to have two phases: Phase (1) a review of the international published literature on 'what works' in community and local development programmes to isolate key principles of effective policy and practice, and a 'benchmarking' exercise to take stock of how community development programmes in Ireland matched up against these core principles; and Phase (2), a process of feeding the results from Phase 1 into planning for the future structure and design of the programmes, and considering implementation and evaluation challenges.

This summary is a preliminary output from the project, highlighting key findings from the first part of the first phase of the review project: a rapid review of the international evidence on the key principles of effective practice in large-scale community and local development programmes. The full text of the review will be published shortly. The results of the initial benchmarking exercise to assess the extent to which the current operations of LDSIP and CDP reflect what is thought to be good practice in the field according to the international evidence, is currently in progress and will be published in due course.

Key terms and definitions

Community development

In the evidence review, we use the term community development to describe a broad approach to working in ways that are empowering and participative. There is a focus on the most disadvantaged sections of the population, who may be defined by age, gender, ethnicity, disability, economic status or other such categories. Provision might be universal or targeted, potentially working with the whole community or a particular group such as young people. It may be open-ended or prioritised to deliver given policy outcomes relating for example to health, community safety, livelihoods, or environmental protection. As the term implies, it is fundamentally about the development of 'community' involving a sense of common identity, capacity and purpose. It can take the form of unpaid active citizenship with community members organizing themselves and taking on leadership roles. Often, it is a discrete practice undertaken by paid workers in mainstream services such as education or specialist agencies located in the statutory or voluntary (third or independent) sectors. Increasingly, community development is embedded in large-scale government-sponsored programmes, such as the LDSIP and CDP in Ireland, which aim to involve communities as partners in the design and delivery of projects and services to enhance wellbeing or to improve local infrastructure.

The emphasis on empowerment, equality, social justice, participation and representation means that community development is fundamentally concerned with decision-making processes affecting users, community-based agencies and services. It is premised on a 'bottom-up' approach, which means enhancing the capacity of communities to determine goals and to pursue issues of importance to them, and to make decisions affecting, for example, the direction of services and the allocation of funds. In the broadest sense, community includes members of particular communities of interest and place, as well as those statutory, voluntary or private community-based agencies and entities with a remit to improve quality of life and to address disadvantage in those areas.

Community development programmes

By community development programme, we mean community development initiatives publicly funded by central and local government, or other large-scale initiatives supported by, for example, a major charitable foundation. The term 'programme' is an umbrella term, generally used to describe a collectivity of services, often organised and delivered on an area-based model, with local management structures and delivery bodies that operate with varying degrees of autonomy from a central governance structure. Programme tends to imply a degree of coherence and integration around funding, structure, design, delivery mechanisms and evaluation processes, though the extent to which integration and coherence is reflected in the actual situation on the ground varies.

Outcomes

An outcome is a change at the level of an individual, a family, a neighbourhood or community or some other structure or entity such as a school or a service-providing agency that comes about as a result of something else. In this context, when we speak of 'outcomes' in community development we mean changes that occur *as a result of* the presence and activities of a community development service or programme. Because it is often the case that many small changes need to be achieved before large changes are realised, it is often helpful to conceptualise outcomes in community-based services and community development as both multi-level, and sequential - for example, as a sequence of phased changes with 'preliminary' and 'intermediate' outcomes leading towards 'end' outcomes. Sequencing does not have to imply linearity in time. Multiple changes, at multiple levels, may happen in parallel in the complex reality of community-based initiatives.

Evidence and effectiveness

The debate about what constitutes evidence in social science in general – and in the field of community development in particular – is a lively one and space here does not permit a detailed discussion of the various positions that can be taken on this issue. There is a substantial international literature on community development as a field, but the empirical scientific literature forms a relatively small sub-set of the overall body of work. Moreover, the evidence focuses more on what *doesn't* work than what does. In particular, the larger portion of the literature deals with programme structure and

governance, and to a lesser extent frameworks for learning from evaluation. Credible evidence of 'what works' in terms of programme design and content, and programme implementation and delivery, that is evidence obtained through rigorous application of accepted scientific methodologies for establishing causal relationships between programme activities and specific outcomes for communities or individuals, is largely absent.

This means that when we talk about the principles of 'effective' practice in this summary we are not often referring to principles that have been proven, by scientific method, to *cause* specific outcomes. More often we are talking about practice that has been carefully inspected by authoritative commentators and is considered to be plausibly related to particular results. This kind of scrutiny may or may not have involved extensive research, and is generally unlikely to have involved testing the results against a 'counterfactual' – that is, exploring whether the observed changes in communities could have happened anyway, without the additional input provided by the programme under consideration. It is also unlikely that this scrutiny will have involved testing out (comparing and contrasting) different approaches to community development to determine which are superior. This means that the extent to which this complex and multi-faceted area of public service can truly be said to be 'evidence-based' is therefore extremely limited: our review suggests the field has a long way to go before we can really be sure 'what works'. On the other hand, it is clear that what has emerged as constituting effective (or ineffective) practice in community development has much in common with the practice principles established in other areas of community-based provision – for example, in the areas of child development and family support, housing, and health. Thus, there is substantial 'read across' from other fields with relatively more established evidence bases and the community development field can benefit from taking a multi-disciplinary perspective on 'what works'.

Methodology for the review of international evidence

The review of international literature was undertaken between March and June 2009. The rapid nature of the review required some strict inclusion and exclusion criteria to be set as parameters to limit the scope of the task, and these were as follows:

- English medium published literature from industrialised countries large and small, where community development is a well-established field - specifically Ireland, Northern Ireland, Britain, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand

- Literature on publicly or philanthropically funded community-based programmes of large scale
- Literature published from 2000 onwards to capture the most up-to-date learning
- Literature dealing with 'what works' – ie, studies and evaluations assessing the impact and effectiveness of programmes in relation to defined outcomes
- Literature pertaining to four key domains of policy and practice in community development:
 1. programme structure and governance
 2. programme design and content
 3. programme implementation and delivery and
 4. programme monitoring, evaluation and feedback.

A range of on-line data bases and research resources were accessed, using systematic search criteria based on the parameters outlined above, which identified in excess of one hundred and fifty publications and electronic resources. For the reasons detailed above, and for the purposes of the rapid review the term 'evidence' was used with some flexibility. Material was selected for quality in relation to clarity, adherence to rigorous and objective methods or other properly articulated processes, whether it was been peer-reviewed, and whether it came from a respected source. We focused mainly on evidence generated by research studies carried out by professional research practitioners, and within this, have sought studies that use robust methods and that have been published after peer review. However we also drew on other sources of evidence where these contain important messages about 'what works' in community development - for example, practitioners' perspectives on their work ('practice wisdom'), or the observations of other authoritative observers in the field. The data were then reviewed by the team, and messages for policy and practice in relation to the four domains listed above were extracted.

The international evidence: key features and principles of effective community development programmes

Structure and governance of programmes

Structure refers to the way that commissioning bodies and local management and delivery bodies relate and are accountable to one another nationally and locally.

Governance refers to the principles and processes by which programmes are overseen

and regulated by commissioners or others with overarching responsibility for their performance.

- There is clear consensus across the literature that the structure and governance of community and local development programmes are critical for their successful functioning. Structure and governance have a major determining role in whether local delivery successfully results in desired outcomes.
- There is overwhelming consensus across developed countries with mature community development sectors that the Partnership model favours good outcomes, whereby local groups of stakeholders collaborate through more or less formal structures to agree and deliver community development inputs at the local level. Partnerships would generally report to a wider national structure that may provide support as well as governance functions.
- 'Partner' can be understood as referring to any entity or grouping that can contribute to the agreed goals. Partners can be national or local, and can come from the statutory, non-profit, or private sectors. They may also include support, resources and expertise of community based groupings that may otherwise be 'under the radar' because of their small-scale.
- To support and guide the Partnership model, there needs to be a clear and consistent lead from government (or the commissioning agency if this is not government). Frequent changes of emphasis or direction from the top dislocate local processes and undermine the potential for good outcomes.
- In spite of the importance of a strong lead from the top, 'top-down' approaches to management tend not to achieve good results in this field. Better results are achieved when localities are able to engage with the policy agenda and allowed latitude to interpret it locally. However, to ensure congruence with public policy objectives, good communications and dialogue between the centre and the localities are needed throughout this process.
- Relatedly, micro-management of local activity by funders does not produce good results. Whilst there needs to be joint working between the centre and the locality in agreeing the broad agenda for action, the details of how policy is interpreted at local level are best delegated to local partners.

- Funding needs to be more than a 'commissioning' relationship and allow for participation at the local level with a reasonable degree of flexibility allowed to local partners to determine allocations between constituent activities and to vary between headings within overall budgets, and reasonable stability of funding over time to allow longer term priorities to be achieved.
- Effective programmes benefit from appropriate technical assistance ('TA') from external sources for example on governance and management issues, in developing funding applications, financial management, and human resource management.
- Good governance in this field requires careful attention to the clarification of the specific roles and remits of partners and funders. Different jurisdictions may manage this in different ways, but early establishment of clear Terms of Reference for partnerships and Service Level Agreements between funding bodies and delivery agents is a common principle of strong governance. Given the special importance of being responsive to local change in this field, the facility to review and reformulate these from time to time should be in-built.
- In addition, in effective programmes there are clear consultative mechanisms in place to allow all partners to participate in the process of negotiating objectives and goals. There is bi-directionality of influence between policy makers and programme commissioners on the one hand, and local partners and delivery bodies on the other.

Programme design and service content

Programme design refers to the principles and processes by which the overall shape of a programme, in terms of its constituent elements, is determined within an agreed framework. **Service content** here refers to the specific nature of services provided at the point of delivery to service beneficiaries – in other words what local community development projects actually provide to local communities.

- The concept of 'programme design' or 'service design' as an evidence-based process is not well-established in the international field of community development. However, there are examples of evidence based approaches, some of which are referenced in the body of the review.

- Concomitantly, there is relatively little robust evidence to help determine whether one form of design is superior to any other, in terms of its relative likelihood of producing positive outcomes. Indeed, even establishing the key elements of design and content of some programmes is difficult. Perhaps this is not surprising given the wide range of programmes and on-the-ground activities that are described as 'community development'.
- Therefore considerably more research is needed to establish the core features of effective design in relation to specific outcomes for specific target populations or groups. However, the core features of effective programme design and content in related community-based fields are relatively well-established, and to some extent these are corroborated within the community development literature, for example:
 1. A '**systems' approach** to programme design has proved helpful in many jurisdictions. It helps to elucidate how the constituent elements (society, community/neighbourhood, school, family, individual etc) are related within an integrated system within which there are many interacting factors, and provides a framework for design by focusing on the levels at which different activities can be targeted and different outcomes might be envisaged.
 2. Programme design is most likely to be robust and effective when it is underpinned by a **clear theoretical framework**, which articulates **why** *Input X* is expected to lead to *Outcome Z*. This should be formulated with reference to existing theory and knowledge about how community needs arise and how change is achieved.
 3. Service content should be determined with reference to a clear description of the expected '**mechanisms of change**', which articulates **how** *Input X* is expected to lead to *Outcome Z*, by way of *Output Y*.
 4. Combined, these two approaches are also sometimes described as a '**theory of change**' approach and can be used to specify a **logic model** that sets out the various inputs, outputs/activities, and outcomes that the programme hopes to achieve and how these are conceptually and practically linked. Providing this logic model is agreed by all parties, it can then be a useful tool for monitoring programme and/or service progress over time.
 5. Programme design (in all fields) makes most sense when it is needs-informed. This implies initial **needs analysis**, carried out at local level, at the very least to

confirm the local situation in relation to nationally-determined priorities for action. Needs analyses can be carried out utilising a combination of existing administrative and demographic or epidemiological data, new surveys of local residents or services, and public and professional consultations, and need not be expensive or lengthy. In high quality programmes, needs analyses are not used simply as 'gap-analyses' or ways of identifying local or community deficits; they are also used to identify strengths and clarify the opportunities for building greater community resilience.

6. It is a well-established principle in many fields of human services that effective programme design is generally '**outcomes-led**' or results-driven. This implies that broad outcomes should be identified before programme design begins, and that specific indicators of success *that are measurable* must be clarified as part of the process of specifying service content.
7. Some literature suggests it may be helpful to conceptualise outcomes in community development as a **sequence of phases** such as 'intermediate' and 'end' outcomes (and perhaps even a prior stage of preliminary or 'pre-outcomes'), and apply critical appraisal skills to the question of the level or phase at which it is really feasible to expect community development programmes to operate and deliver results.
8. Given the wide potential scope of community development activities, effective programmes generally have to **restrict the number of priorities** for change that they address through their programme design, focusing in on a carefully selected group of feasible activities bearing in mind local resources and other capacity issues.
9. Within this, the evidence from related community-based fields and from effective community development programmes is that **multi-dimensional** (or 'multi-modal') **designs**, with service offers that draw on a **menu** of approaches to support different learning styles, tend to be associated with the strongest outcomes. The involvement of multi-disciplinary teams at both the design and the implementation stages is a feature of successful programmes internationally.
10. **Documentation** or '**manualisation**' of what, precisely, the Programme and its constituent services or activities consist is likely to be a key principle of effective practice since without it, monitoring and evaluation cannot take place, and replication of successful approaches is thus prevented. The process of

documentation generally involves the development of standards and benchmarks.

Implementation and delivery of programmes

Implementation and delivery refers to the principles and processes by which programmes and services are put into action 'on the ground'. Without effective implementation processes and high quality front-line delivery to service beneficiaries, even the best-designed and best structured and governed programmes will fail.

- A key principle of effective implementation, flowing from the notion of partnership working utilised by many effective community development programmes around the world, is the involvement of multiple partners in delivering the programme activities at the neighbourhood level. Partly this serves to operationalise and 'make real' the concept of multi-agency partnership; partly this ensures that the multi-dimensional approach is supported.
- The most promising approaches in this respect involve collaboration between central or local government and the local delivery agents in determining how the programme should operate and how outcomes should be achieved by means of a negotiated process.
- At the local level, programmes are more likely to be effective when all partners work collaboratively to establish needs, agree goals and strategies, and to set and monitor timeframes for joint working.
- In related fields of community-based service provision, effective programmes are supported by technical assistance ('TA') during the implementation process, to trouble-shoot around implementation challenges and ensure adherence to quality standards.
- Workforce issues feature strongly in the international literature. The critical role of the team/project leader or 'champion' at local level has been documented as a major factor predicting success, with the most effective leaders being skilled in a number of different areas as well as in leadership, and having intimate local knowledge and strong local credibility.

- Also on the issue of workforce, close attention to training and development of front-line workers and volunteers is a key feature of successful programmes, both to build and retain a competent workforce to deliver complex work with often high-need communities, and to ensure that work is delivered to a high standard.
- Relatedly, mechanisms and tools (including standards and benchmarks) for 'quality control' of front-line work are developed by successful programmes to ensure that work stays close to the agreed objectives of the programme or service and conforms to principles of effective delivery (in as far as these are clear).

Monitoring, evaluation and feedback

Monitoring, evaluation and feedback are three different terms that are often (counterproductively) conflated in the literature and discourse on community development. **Monitoring** is a counting (or accounting) process, concerned with the assessment of whether agreed inputs have been made as per Service Level Agreements and whether key targets for service uptake have been achieved. On its own, monitoring does not generally provide information on the impact or effectiveness of a programme; only its throughput and resource utilisation. **Evaluation** is a process that involves the systematic investigation of pre-determined questions preferably using scientifically robust (transparent and replicable) research methods, and assesses processes, outcomes and impact of a programme or service.

Feedback is the process by which the results of monitoring and evaluation are validated and fed back into the programme management, design and delivery to achieve programme improvements.

- Successful programmes generally find ways to collect robust monitoring information that utilise data already collected routinely by the programme, bearing in mind that the collection of accurate data for monitoring processes should not require disproportionate burden on the part of the service managers and front-line workers or volunteers.
- It is widely accepted that a key requirement for robust evaluation of both implementation and outcomes is that evaluators should be intellectually and practically independent of those who deliver the programme.

- There is evidence from the international literature that various forms of self-evaluation (also sometimes called 'action research') can be helpful in promoting learning and reflective practice at the front line.
- However, local involvement and participatory research is not a substitute for independent scientific evaluation, which is widely acknowledged to be an ethical imperative when significant public expenditure is involved and large numbers of people are exposed to the untested effects of the programme.
- Effective programmes suggest that partners and communities can and should be productively involved all types of evaluation, to ensure that there is local 'buy-in' and that external researchers do not overlook key issues that may affect the results or the interpretation of results.
- An important message is that monitoring, evaluation and feedback processes are only of value when they contribute to learning and development in programmes.

Conclusions – key features of effective practice

Community development as a field of public service embodies special characteristics, including an inherent focus on local participation, empowerment and community self-determination, which require thoughtful and sensitive engagement by central governance structures. These characteristics constitute key strengths and opportunities: when effectively nurtured and supported, they can be powerful levers of change for communities, and powerful ways to deliver national public policy priorities at local level.

However, they are also the key challenges for public policy administrative structures. With these characteristics comes an inevitable tendency towards diversity and fragmentation that must be managed if programmes are to be kept integrated and coherent at a national level. The degree of variability at local level can be counterproductive for adherence to effective practice standards, and may also militate against local accountability to national priorities. Programmes that vary substantially at local level also become very challenging (and sometimes impossible) to evaluate using orthodox scientific methods. This in turn renders them non-accountable for outcomes and cost-effectiveness, thereby eroding political and public buy-in. It is therefore a key message from the literature that complexity must be managed, and to

some extent constrained, if large-scale programmes are to *be effective*, and *be seen to be effective*.

Another key implication from the international evidence is that the *process* of community development is of itself an outcome – this makes it different from other fields. This requires close attention by funders and evaluators to capture the wide range of potential benefits of work in this complex field. It also requires a recognition that a focus on ‘end outcomes’ alone (for example, numbers of people removed from the unemployment register) may be too simplistic as an indicator of effectiveness. The process by which outcomes are achieved, via preliminary and intermediate outcomes (e.g. becoming better informed about employment opportunities, and acquiring skills that increase employability) may also be a key aspect of effective work.

Finally, the literature is clear that community development programmes are not ‘quick fixes’ for entrenched social problems. Effective programmes take time to mature. However, given strong and not over-complicated structure, adequate resources, good governance and management, careful design, high-quality delivery standards and proper monitoring, evaluation and feedback, they can achieve important positive changes for local communities across a range of outcomes.

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