



Key messages

FROM THE CENTRE FOR EFFECTIVE SERVICES SEPTEMBER 2010

Effective community development programmes

A review of the international evidence base

Shortly after it was established in 2008, the Centre for Effective Services was asked to review two important community development programmes in Ireland: the Local Development Social Inclusion Programme (LDSIP) and the Community Development Programme (CDP). Part of the review's purpose was to seek lessons from the international evidence base about effectiveness in community development type programmes funded by central and local government, or other large-scale institutions such as major charitable foundations.

Below we summarise key messages from the literature in relation to four aspects of the programme – management, design, delivery and evaluation.

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 structure and governance in community development type programmes have a major determining role in whether local delivery results in desired outcomes. Key points are:

- 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.
- 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.
- There is no evidence to suggest that micro-management of local activity by funders produces 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 should be seen as a negotiated, long-term investment in community capability. It should 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.
- 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 imperative to be responsive to local change in this field, the facility to review and reformulate these from time to time should be in-built.
- Regarding arrangements for governance, community engagement is of central importance in addressing democratic deficit, in modernising government, in building community cohesion and in terms of plans to improve programme design and service content.



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 entities actually provide to communities. Key points are:

- A 'systems' (or 'ecological') 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.
- Programme design is most likely to be robust and effective when it is underpinned by a clear theoretical framework, which makes explicit the expectations around why providing Input X should lead to change in Outcome Z. This should be formulated with reference to existing theory about how community needs arise and how change is achieved.
- Service content should be determined with reference to a clearly articulated description of the expected mechanisms of change, which makes explicit the expectations around how Input X should lead to change in Outcome Z, perhaps by way of Output Y.
- Combined, these two approaches are sometimes described as a 'theory of change' 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.
- Programme design 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. The analysis helps to establish a baseline against which it is possible to measure progress towards achieving goals.
- 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.
- It is a 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.
- A focus on outcomes can help to avoid the situation where performance is being measured in the abstract. In this approach, required actions and activities can be projected backwards from the desired results rather than forwards from a longer term or aspirational goal.
- Some literature suggests it may be helpful to conceptualise outcomes in the community development field as a sequence of phases such as 'preliminary', 'intermediate' and 'end' 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.
- 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 and bearing in mind local resources and other capacity issues.
- Within this, the evidence from related community-based fields and from successful community development programmes, such as Communities That Care, is that multi-dimensional 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 and delivery stages is a feature of successful programmes internationally.

Implementation and delivery of programmes

Implementation and delivery refer 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. Key points are:

- A 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 many partners in delivering the programme activities at the neighbourhood level. Partly this serves to 'make real' the concept of multi-agency partnership; partly this ensures that the multi-dimensional 'systems' or 'ecological' approach required to deliver effective services to communities, as noted above, 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.
- The evidence is clear that collaboration is not an end in itself. Instead, collaborations can play an important role in building up the local infrastructure, including support and umbrella bodies, networks and forums, in order to develop long-term assets and endowments and enable dialogue between communities and the authorities.
- This work requires active community engagement at different levels and in a variety of ways in policy-making and decision-making processes.
- Enabling partnership activity and community engagement to fulfil its potential, and facilitating active participation, requires appropriate resources and skilled professional support.
- 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.
- 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.

Monitoring and evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are terms that are often (counter-productively) conflated in the literature and debates 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. Key points are:

- 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 effort 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 and effective programmes develop an appropriate combination of internal and external processes, with the latter being an ethical imperative when significant public expenditure is involved and large numbers of people are exposed to the untested effects of the programme.
- Evidence suggests that partners and communities can and should be productively involved in 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 of particular value when they contribute to learning and development in programmes.
- Mechanisms and tools (including standards and benchmarks) for ‘quality control’ of front-line work are highly 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).
- Documentation or ‘manualisation’ of what, precisely, the programme and its constituent services or activities consist of 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.

Conclusion

The evidence from this review 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, good governance, careful design, high-quality delivery standards and proper monitoring, evaluation and feedback, they can achieve important positive changes for local communities. The particular nature of community development, however, requires close attention by funders and evaluators to capture the wide range of potential benefits of work in this complex field. It means recognising 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. If disadvantaged people are involved in decision-making processes when previously they were not, their participation is already a desired outcome.

About this Review

Further details about this review and the methods used to compile it can be found in the full publication *Effective Community Development Programmes, a review of the international evidence base* by John Bamber, Stella Owens, Heino Schonfeld, Deborah Ghate and Deirdre Fullerton (2010) Dublin: Centre for Effective Services. To order a free copy please contact office@effectiveservices.org and quote Poo1 Evidence Review.

Further copies of these Key Messages can be ordered from office@effectiveservices.org by quoting Poo1 Key Messages.

A larger Executive Summary extracted from the Evidence Review and the Technical Report that supports the Evidence Review are available to download from www.effectiveservices.org/projects.php

About the Centre for Effective Services

The Centre for Effective Services is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee (company number 451580 in Ireland) and is governed by an Independent Board. The work of the Centre is supported by the Atlantic Philanthropies, the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, and the Department of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs.

It is part of a new generation of intermediary organisations across the world working to apply learning from the emerging science of implementation to real world policy and practice concerns. The over-arching mission of the Centre is to connect the design and delivery of services with scientific and technical knowledge of ‘what works’ in order to improve outcomes for children, young people, and the families and communities in which they live.

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