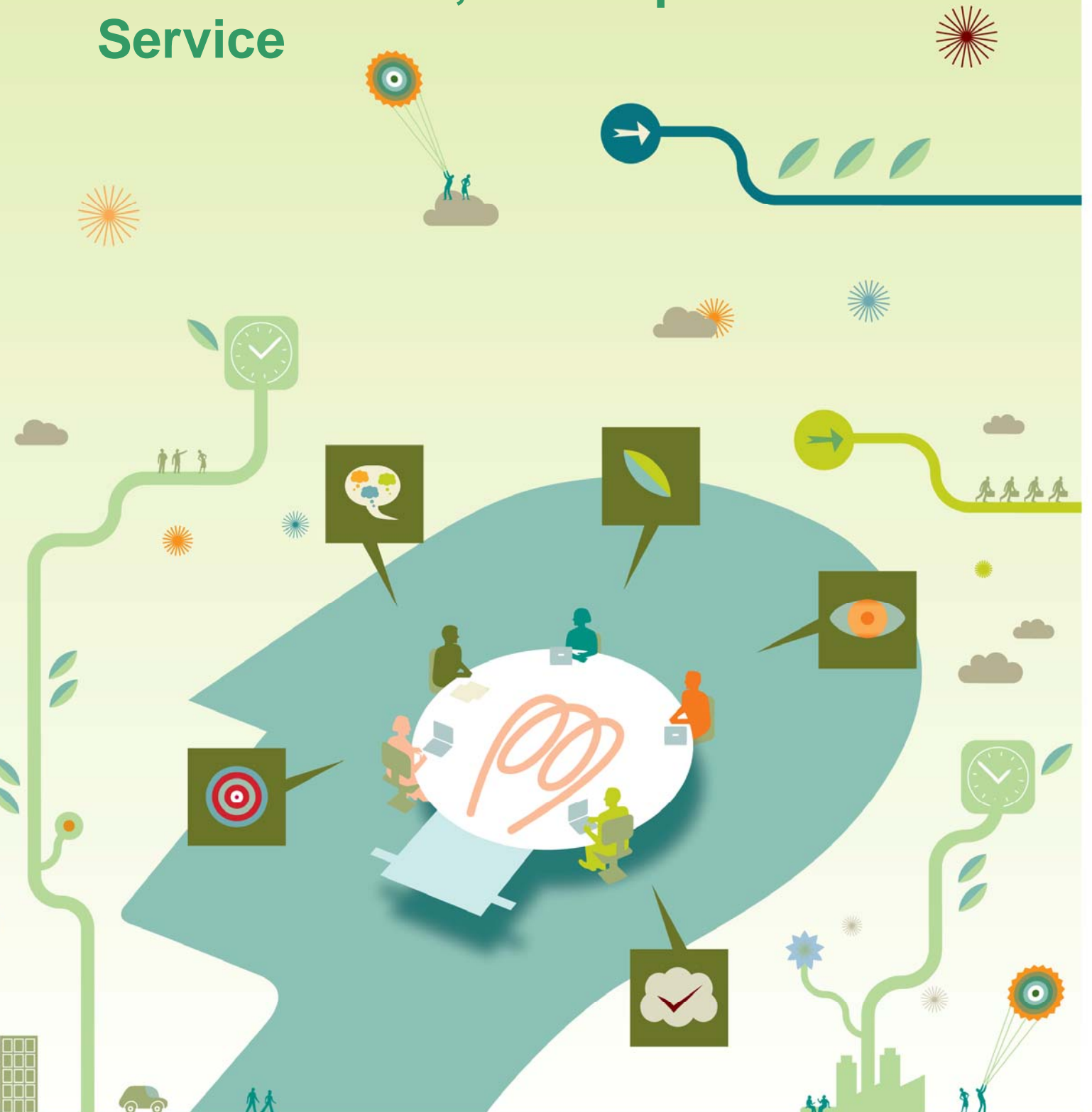


Briefing Paper 18



The Evidence Base for an Outcomes Approach

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Purpose of this paper

Briefing Papers aim to set out current thinking, discussion and debate around a specific topic or question. They provide new perspectives and can be used to outline potential ways in which to tackle the issues as we go forward.

This particular paper was written by Andrew Noble and is part of a series of publications arising from the Improvement Service (IS) / Scottish Centre for Regeneration (SCR) collaborative project, which focuses on 'Embedding an Outcomes Approach in Community Regeneration & Tackling Poverty'. Whilst the IS / SCR project is working with local partnerships involved in the area of community regeneration / tackling poverty, the issues covered within this paper are generic in nature, based on good practice collected from working in the field and are likely to be of wider interest across the public sector.

The views expressed in Briefing Papers are not necessarily shared by the Scottish Government.

What is this Briefing about?

This paper is about the evidence base to support the development of strategic and operational approaches to achieving key community regeneration and tackling poverty outcomes. There is a large amount of evidence available to Community Planning Partnerships to underpin the development of their poverty and regeneration strategies, and linking these to their Single Outcome Agreements. Key challenges facing Community Planning Partnerships include:

- Effectively using the evidence that is available.
- Critically reviewing and analysing the evidence base to ensure that it is robust enough to identify key poverty and regeneration priorities.
- Applying the evidence base intelligently in order to shape the partnership's priorities and action; and,
- Tracking the progress being made in addressing these priorities.

About the 'Embedding an Outcome Approach in Community Regeneration and Tackling Poverty' Project

The overall aim of the IS - SCR collaborative project, "Embedding an Outcomes Approach in Tackling Poverty and Community Regeneration" (a pilot demonstrator project) is to encourage the embedding of an outcomes approach in community regeneration and tackling poverty within local areas.

A key aim is to help local partnerships develop and fulfill the potential of the outcomes approach, by ensuring that they can access relevant practical support and advice in specialist areas and in a format which meets their requirements.

The project is working with five local partnerships, Dumfries and Galloway, Falkirk, Fife, Midlothian and West Lothian. In particular, the project is seeking to develop and pilot new forms of support that will help to encourage the development of capacity regarding how the outcomes approach can best be embraced within the context of community regeneration / poverty.

The ultimate aim is that the support provided to the local partnerships will help them achieve the delivery of more effective and sustainable outcomes within their local communities in the area of regeneration / tackling poverty.

The project will also aim to encourage wider adoption of the learning from these demonstrator projects by capturing the key findings and experiences from each project. This paper is part of this dissemination of learning.

Background

The introduction of the Concordat, National Performance Framework, Single Outcome Agreements (SOAs) and the three Social Policy Frameworks, "[Achieving our Potential](#)", "[Equally Well](#)" and "[The Early Years Framework](#)" has placed an ever greater focus at a national and local level on a clear understanding of the evidence available to Community Planning Partnerships to accurately assess the key challenges and priorities for their areas.

The SOA Guidance published in 2008 made it very clear, "SOAs must be evidence based - it should be based on an integrated area profile of social, economic and environmental conditions and trends and considerations of future challenges and opportunities". As the SOA Guidance notes, a comprehensive analysis of the available evidence will "identify the strategic local priorities which will be expressed as outcomes".

The outcomes approach is predicated on an agreed and robust evidence base that determines the priorities and outcomes of a Community Planning Partnership (CPP). Good use of the available evidence base will encourage a partnership to focus on the "big ticket" issues that really matter to communities and which the partners can actively influence. Without an agreed and robust evidence base, local Community Planning Partnerships run the very significant risk of focusing on the "wrong" priorities and outcomes as well as failing to identify the most effective approaches and interventions to achieve stated outcomes.

What do we mean by evidence base?

An evidence based approach has been defined as one that "helps people make well informed decisions about policies, programmes and projects by putting the best available evidence... at the heart of policy development and implementation".¹

A robust coherent evidence based approach allows CPPs to do three critical things:

1. Clearly identify the major challenges and priorities that face them in their locality- **"what do we need to know?"**
2. Be able to determine the most appropriate policy and intervention response to address their key priorities and achieve their stated outcomes.- **"what works"?**
3. Be able to track, over time, the impact the CPP is having against there identified priority outcomes- **"what difference are we making"?**

It should be noted however that evidence, although it plays a critical role, is just one driver of policy development and prioritisation. Prioritisation ([see Learning Point 63- Prioritisation of Key Outcomes](#)) is, and will always remain a political, in both upper and lower case, activity. The point of the evidence based approach is to develop an "evidence based consensus" on

¹ Phillip Davies 1999 "what is evidence based education?", British Journal of Educational Studies 47,2,108-121 (Phillip Davies 1999 "what is evidence based education?", British Journal of Educational Studies 47,2,108-121

priorities and interventions to address key outcomes. This consensus needs to be reached across the Community Planning Partnership, with stakeholders and the broader population.

The Evidence Based approach in practice

Perhaps the clearest example of the evidence based approach in Scotland is the introduction of the smoking ban in public places in 2005. The medical evidence of the risk of smoking to health, particularly in relation to heart disease and cancer (specifically lung cancer) has been well established since the early 1960's.

Based on the huge and irrefutable evidence base for the harm that smoking causes public health and Scotland's historically very high rates of smoking related deaths, the Scottish Executive with cross party political support, took the decision to ban smoking in public places. By monitoring the number of smoking related deaths and heart attacks before and after the introduction of the ban, it can be clearly demonstrated that the introduction of the smoking ban has had a demonstrable impact on improving public health in Scotland.

Where does Evidence come from?

The Cabinet Office Strategic Policy Team, defines evidence as being drawn from the following sources:

- **Expert knowledge-** For example, specialist analytical officers, statisticians, public health practitioners and professional staff in associated policy areas.
- **Published research-** A wide range of social policy research, for example studies carried out by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and other social policy think tanks and research organisations, such as the Young Foundation.
- **Existing statistics-** national datasets, such as Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics, the wide range of statistical information published by the Scottish Government and the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.
- **Stakeholder consultations-** Local research studies, both qualitative and quantitative can play a critical role in developing understanding of poverty and deprivation in an area. Examples include community engagement exercises, citizen's panels, focus groups with service users and so on.
- **Previous policy evaluations-** Evaluations carried out by the CPPs can be very useful sources of evidence with regard to the practical application of previous approaches. For example a number of previously ring fenced funding streams, for example, Better Neighbourhood Services Fund, Community Regeneration Funding, Working for Families and so on have had national and local evaluations carried out to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of earlier approaches to tackling poverty and deprivation.
- The Poverty and Community Regeneration Community of Practice (CoP) hosted on the Scottish Centre for Regeneration (SCR) website contains a number policy and programme evaluation reports.

- **Costing of policy options-** An analysis of the cost benefit and/or value for money of different interventions, for example different approaches to tackling worklessness.
- **Outputs from economic and statistical modelling-** These approaches tend to be undertaken at a national as opposed to local level.

This range of sources of evidence is instructive. The sources set out above are not solely reliant on statistics, published research and evaluations or on the expert view of key professional groups. CPPs need to consider how they can best weigh the range of sources of evidence they have available to them.

The views of stakeholders and the general public are also seen as valuable sources of evidence. As was noted “there is a great deal of critical evidence held in the minds of both front-line staff...and those to whom policy is directed”.²

What are the important issues?

Research has shown that there are four requirements for improving evidence use in policy and practice.³ In the context of Community Planning Partnerships and the Outcomes approach these requirements are

1. Agreement, between Community Planning partners and with wider stakeholders, as what counts as evidence and in what circumstances, and critically a common understanding of what the evidence is “telling them”.
2. A strategic approach to the development of an evidence base with a systematic effort to accumulate evidence in the form of robust bodies of knowledge.
3. Effective dissemination of evidence across the CPP and to wider stakeholders to where it is most needed and the development of effective means of providing wide access to knowledge.
4. Initiatives to ensure the integration of evidence based approaches into policy and encourage the utilisation of evidence in practice.

In terms of reaching an agreement on what is included in the evidence base, the approach taken by CPPs should be one of an “evidence based consensus” where decision makers, policy research and delivery staff and wider stakeholders agree on the key sources of evidence and, critically, have a common understanding and analysis of what the evidence base is telling them about their area. It is worth noting that the evidence base will evolve and develop over time, as new research is undertaken at a national and local level, and because the “facts on the ground” will change as wider economic and social forces impact on local areas.

Developing a robust evidence base for poverty and community regeneration, and more broadly for the development and implementation of an outcomes approach, means CPPs

² *The Cabinet Office Strategic Policy Making Team*

³ *Evidenced based policy and practice: cross sector lessons from the UK, Nutley, Davies and Walter, University of St. Andrew's 2002*

have to align their policy and research capacity and resources to ensure that the relevant national and local evidence is collated reviewed, analysed and updated. It is also critical that this evidence is presented to key stakeholders and decision makers in a clear, concise and consistent manner.

[Learning Point 58](#), written for the SCR by John McKendrick of Glasgow Caledonian University outlined an approach to developing a Local Poverty Profile which sets out how CPPs can succinctly present the key poverty statistics and priorities in there area for a range of partners and stakeholders.

A common challenge for CPPs across a range of policy areas, for example in Children's Services, is the management of data and information, including ownership and sharing of data and information. This is a persistent issue for partnership working, and in most cases, this can be resolved via an information sharing protocol between partners, agreed through the appropriate Community Planning mechanism.

Linked to this is the need for all partners to participate fully in the development and maintenance of the evidence base. There could be a risk of a single partner doing all the work to collate and update the data and information which goes into developing and sustaining this resource.

The evidence base for local partnerships needs to be reviewed and updated on a regular basis. This will help to ensure that Partnerships are kept informed of changes in their local area, both in terms of new emerging challenges and of the impact, or lack of impact of partnership interventions. Regularly reviewing the evidence base will also help to ensure Partnerships do not become complacent and a static evidence base does not simply become the "received wisdom" of the Partnership.

What have we learned?

The IS / SCR project "Embedding an Outcomes approach in tackling Poverty and Community Regeneration" is working with five Community Planning partnerships to support the development of an "outcomes" approach. It is notable that across the five CPPs, two of them have identified support in developing the local evidence base and a "poverty profile" ([See Learning Point 58 for more detail](#)) as a key issue.

There are significant organisational issues surrounding the development of a robust local evidence base for tackling poverty outcomes. Central to this is how CPPs collate, analyse and report on the evidence that is available to them. One significant challenge is for CPPs to effectively align their policy and research resources, to ensure that data analysis and research are fed through to policy staff. CPPs will often have a range of policy and research resources that are "scattered" across the partnership, and have not been coordinated effectively to develop, maintain and enhance the CPPs evidence base.

Critically CPPS need to link a strong evidence base to the practical application of service and policy intervention. Partnerships need to have the ability to act positively on what the evidence is "telling" them. There needs to be a follow through from research and policy into actual service delivery.

Clearly linked to this is the issue of available resources. Some CPPs, may lack local research and policy staff and resources required to underpin the development of evidence based policy relating to poverty and community regeneration. They would

benefit from additional support from national data and statistical analysis resources to build capacity in this area.

The CPPs ability to understand and analyse the available evidence is central to the development and implementation of the outcomes approach. As important, is the use of evidence to underpin resource allocation decisions, particularly in the very challenging financial conditions that will prevail in the public sector in Scotland over the medium term.

The skills and experience to interrogate and analyse a range of evidence sources at a Community Planning Partnership level are patchy across Scotland. Some CPPs have an integrated approach to gathering, analysing and presenting evidence. A good example of this is the approach taken in Fife with the “Know Fife” dataset website (www.knowfife.gov.uk.) The Know Fife dataset “brings together information on needs and outcomes together with activity and expenditure from a range of local systems and national datasets”. Many CPPs may not have the resources to follow the same approach as Fife, however it is an example of interesting practice.

Finally it is worth noting that there is always the risk of “paralysis by analysis”. Community Planning Partners need to avoid expending large and increasingly scarce resources on researching and analysing data that gets bogged down in tiny detail. This is particularly a risk with poverty, as it is a complex and multi-faceted issue. CPPs focus should always be on using the available evidence to inform priorities and subsequent action.

Sources of Evidence for Poverty and Community Regeneration

There is a wide range of sources to provide evidence relating to poverty and community regeneration available to Community Planning Partnerships.

These include:

- **The Poverty Site (www.poverty.org.uk)**. A repository of key poverty information for Scotland and the other nations in the UK. This is a website which is maintained by the New Policy Institute with the support of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- **Scottish Government Social and Welfare Statistics publications (www.scotland.gov.uk/topics/statistics/social-welfare)**. A very wide range of data published
- **Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (www.scotland.gov.uk/topics/statistics/simd)**. - Source for indentifying the most deprived areas in Scotland. The separate domains contain a great deal of data on employment, benefit and tax credits, education, health, housing, population, community care and physical environment.
- **Scottish Neighbourhood Statistics (www.sns.gov.uk)**. - A range of information, including population, employment, educational attainment, health and benefit uptake held at a number of geographic levels, down to small (data zone) area.
- **Community Health Profiles (www.scotpho.org.uk)** - Produced on a bi-annual basis by the Scottish Public Health Observatory. The profiles provide a very wide range of data on public health, health inequality and population and deprivation data for local authority areas. Trend data are available as well as comparisons between local authority area and the Scottish average for the data indicators.

- **Scottish Household Survey**
(www.scotland.gov.uk/topics/statistics/scottishhouseholdsurvey) - A national annual survey conducted by the Scottish Government which contains information on neighbourhood satisfaction, income, financial inclusion, volunteering and community safety, amongst a wide range of other topics.
- **Scottish House Condition Survey (www.scotland.gov.uk/topics/statistics/shcs.)-**
a national annual survey which provides information at a local authority level on housing quality and fuel poverty.
- **Community Regeneration and Tackling Poverty Learning Network**
(www.communities.idea.gov.) - A source for case studies and evaluations of specific service and policy interventions.



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- regenerating communities and tackling poverty
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- making housing more energy efficient
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