Evaluating asset-based approaches

The asset-based Community of Practice gathering on 28 August at The Melting Pot focused on evaluation – challenges, opportunities and experiences. Steven Marwick, of Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS), facilitated the morning.

Who cares and what are the challenges?
Brief summary of first round table discussion:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I care about:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having a voice</td>
<td>The community</td>
<td>Demonstrating</td>
<td>Impact of</td>
<td>Better</td>
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<td>“Assets?”</td>
<td>I work in</td>
<td>success/learning</td>
<td>funding and</td>
<td>outcomes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I’m busy!”</td>
<td>My challenge:</td>
<td>what works</td>
<td>learning</td>
<td>What works?</td>
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<td>“Will it make</td>
<td>Reporting</td>
<td>My challenge:</td>
<td>My challenge:</td>
<td>My challenge:</td>
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<td>a difference?”</td>
<td>what’s real</td>
<td>Evidence is</td>
<td>Risk. Tracking</td>
<td>Cuts. Short</td>
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<td></td>
<td>without</td>
<td>meaningful.</td>
<td>over time.</td>
<td>term funding.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>breaking trust</td>
<td>Don’t be risk</td>
<td>Knowing when</td>
<td>Lack of long</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>averse</td>
<td>to let go</td>
<td>term evidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Practitioner</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>Funder</td>
<td>Policy-maker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td></td>
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3 speakers gave their perspective on evaluation and asset-based approaches:

Mhairi Reid from the Big Lottery Fund spoke about ‘Our Place’ a place-based initiative supporting local communities across 7 areas of Scotland. She talked about the need to stay flexible, valuing individual stories while trying to find common elements.

Shuggy Hughes, Link UP Worker, talked of ‘stealth evaluation’, working with volunteers to capture examples of change through everyday conversations. He spoke of the challenges of ‘measuring emotions’ when people’s journeys can sometimes feel like ‘2 steps forwards, 8 steps back’. Shuggy described evaluation as ongoing reflection.

Neil Craig, NHS Health Scotland talked about reconciling the need for transferable learning about “what works”, with the different needs of each community. What is valuable is different for each community. Also there is a competition for resources with acute care. He said participation is an important factor in health improvement.

Comments that followed the speakers:

"It is more the quality of engagement rather than the outcomes"
"We need to capture the story of change as we build relationships over time"
"We need more examples of experiences so we don’t keep rolling out the same story"
"The evaluation framework should start with conversations – what’s really happening"
"Communities should be the ones making sense of their own changes"
Participants discussed what resonated with them so far and shared their own evaluation practice. This generated some top tips

**Top tips**

- Have a good mix of evidence – hard and soft that demonstrates the diversity
- Put the ‘value’ into evaluation by exploring the core values of AB approaches
- Don’t be scared by plain English
- Enable communities to lead evaluation and analysis – trust works both ways!
- It’s ok to have different approaches. But evaluate your approach – as well as the outcomes - so we understand strengths of different AB programmes.
- What evidence will help us to take more risks?
- Don’t assume there is a magic formula. There is no single ‘right’ method
- The route between players needs to be as short as possible – story of community to decision-makers in danger of being ‘diluted’
- Is there benefit in a community/project ‘brand’ making it easier for people to identify with the programme, own it and recognise the difference it’s made
- Big money doesn’t have to mean big evaluation!!

Finally participants completed cards to answer the following questions:

**What could you do to improve your evaluation of asset-based approaches?**

"Involve local people in analysis of data and getting community involved”
"Be more creative e.g. video diaries, facebook, twitter, capturing stories"
"Capture and reflect what’s happening more systematically”
"Challenge funders’ expectations and processes”
"Loosen up and relax – stories really do work!”
"I need to be better at action research and what it offers”

**What would you like help with?**

"Evaluation approach that is owned by community but still consistent”
"Share practice and have time to focus on evaluation – more opportunities to discuss”
"Tracking change over time”
"How to involve community meaningfully in analysis”
"Distil learning across all asset-based projects”
"Creative approaches”

**What would you like others to take action on?**

"Embrace evaluation as an asset not a burden”
"More support and more visits from funders”
"Permission/space/freedom/patience from: councils, funders, Scottish Government”
"Flexible, longer term different approaches for different communities”
"Stop worrying about proof – you will never get it”
"ESS organise more of this and bring us back together in 6 months”

This is just a brief summary of a discussion buzzing with ideas, challenges, some of (useful) discomfort and enthusiasm amongst the 40 people in the room. This was just a start and ESS will reflect on what they can do next. Several participants expressed interest in continuing discussions through the network.