CLES
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local work

Robust evidence for effective policy

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Authors: Paul McKenna, Senior Consultant, paulmckenna@cles.org.uk, Micaela Mazzei, Consultant, micaelamazzei@cles.org.uk, Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES), 0161 236 7036

Introduction

In recent years, data collection and evidence-based policy and interventions have become increasingly important, and can be seen as a response to the Government's drive to improve the quality of policy development and practical interventions. Evidence informs the debate around priorities, targets and monitoring performance, ensures better project development and supports management and planning. It serves the purpose of demonstrating what works for whom and in what circumstances. As evidence is at the basis of policy and interventions development, making the best use of it implies following a process, based on the principles of collecting data and turning this into information before developing intelligence.

The use of evidence to inform policy is an issue that has been challenging national, regional and local tiers of government, particularly in terms of economic regeneration, and social policy issues. CLES has long been involved in policy and consultancy work looking at facilitating and improving the use of evidence in policy and project development. This includes working on behalf of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU), the Research and Development Division (R&DD) and NRU's Service Delivery Team as the North West pilot (with focus on Lancashire) for a project aiming at Supporting Evidence for Local Delivery (SELD). CLES Consulting was recently commissioned by Government Office London, Government Office South West and Government Office North West to support local teenage pregnancy partnerships to improve the way in which evidence supports teenage pregnancy policy.

The purpose of this Local Work is to use CLES' experience of working with teenage pregnancy partnerships to get the most out of the available data, to show how local partnerships can develop evidence more effectively. We cover the following themes:

- **Background context** – the paper begins by considering the various policy developments that have led to an increased focus on using data and evidence;
- **Data framework** – next, the paper outlines the data framework, which aims to provide organisations and partnerships with a tool that can be used to improve the use of data and evidence;
- **Case study** – finally, the paper presents the key messages from work that CLES Consulting has carried out with teenage pregnancy partnerships across the country, thus providing an explanation of the practical use of the framework and presenting the main findings from this work.

Background context

Modernisation

Since 1997, reforming and modernising government has been a central theme of the Labour administration. One of the key elements of this theme has been the commitment to an evidence based culture. The '*Modernising Government White Paper*' (Cabinet Office 1999a) stated that government policy must be evidence-based, properly evaluated and based on best practice. A report from the Cabinet Office Strategic Policy Making Team on '*Professional Policy Making for the Twenty-First Century*' (Cabinet Office, 1999b) suggested that "policy making must be soundly based on evidence of what works" and that government departments must improve their capacity to make use of evidence.

Area based initiatives

The encouragement of evidence based policy has been visible at all tiers of government but perhaps mostly at the local level. Area based programmes such as the Single Regeneration Budget Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, and New Deal for Communities have all emphasised the importance of developing bespoke solutions to localised problems identified through a robust evidence base and further analysis and monitoring. This emphasis on data and evidence was also seen in a number of thematic policy areas such as crime and disorder, public health and the local economy.

Local Area Agreements

The drive towards a better understanding of policy issues at a local level was further reinforced with the publication of '*Sustainable Communities: People, Places, Prosperity*', (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2005) which set out the agenda for the Local Area Agreements (LAAs). These are three-year agreements between local authorities, central government, and local partners. The LAAs set out how local priorities will be met by applying local solutions delivered by a range of partners. From 2008 LAAs have been restructured to place more emphasis on area based service delivery, giving more freedom in spending decisions and have fewer central targets and reporting systems.

Sub-National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration

In 2007, the Sub National Review encouraged local authorities to shape the economy of their place through the development of an evidence-based approach. In the recently published response to the public consultation of the regeneration framework[1], government have announced a duty on lead authorities to carry out an assessment of the economic conditions of their area, the statutory Economic Assessment Duty. Although awaiting the final detailed guidance on what the new local economic assessments should include and how they should be conducted, the latest policy statement[2] from CLG based on the draft guidance emphasises the central role that the assessments will play in shaping local and regional strategies. The statement says "*An assessment should form part of the evidence base for the Sustainable Community Strategy. Flowing from this, the assessment should also inform local area agreement (LAA) and multi-area agreement (MAA) negotiations… Local economic assessments should also inform Local Development Frameworks*" (p.8).

Assessment

The Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) is designed to help local authorities and their partners improve local services for their communities. CAA considers how the local authority is run and ranks them as excellent, good, fair, weak or poor. Both the Economic Assessment Duty and the Comprehensive Area Assessment, alongside the National Indicator Set and Best Value Performance Indicators, illustrate the policy agenda within which local authorities and their partners' work is increasingly reliant on a local evidence base. The final CAA framework will be published in February 2009 by partner inspectorates and this assessment of local areas will come in effect from April 2009.

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[1] CLG (2008) Prosperous Places: taking forward the review of sub-national economic development and regeneration - The Government response to public consultation http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/citiesandregions/pdf/1073344.pdf

2 CLG (2009) *Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill - Local Economic Assessments*, Policy Statement http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/citiesandregions/pdf/1130294.pdf

Why is evidence important?

Local evidence enables local partnerships to understand the nature and characteristics of the context in which they operate and monitor changes. Perhaps most importantly, evidence enables partnerships to fit policy to this context. The more relevant the evidence base to the local context, the more likely it is that partnerships will develop effective responses to local problems. Complex social policy issues are affected by a range of factors and they also tend to be interrelated, so for instance issues such as teenage pregnancy, substance misuse and youth unemployment can all be partly explained by an understanding of local socio economic factors in which these phenomena occur. The impact of these factors differs from area to area and, as every area is different, it is important to develop a comprehensive local knowledge to understand how these factors have an impact on the ground. Local evidence enables partnerships to understand what activities are likely to have an impact, how they should be delivered and what impact they actually have.

Case Study

Regarding CLES' experience and particularly choice of case study for this Local Work, CLES Consulting has undertaken extensive work on behalf of the Government Office for London, working with 14 London Boroughs, facilitating two workshops with each of the teenage pregnancy partnerships in these areas. The first workshops were used to ascertain the key issues that the Boroughs needed to address, in order to improve the way in which evidence is used to inform teenage pregnancy policy. After agreeing the key issues, each of the Boroughs agreed a bespoke action plan. These action plans included a range of activities, including mapping exercises, development of data sharing processes, and identification of key risk factors associated with teenage pregnancy. The plans were then implemented by the partnerships and a second round of workshops focused on discussing the progress made in delivering the action plans. We feel that this has been an important piece of work for developing our thinking and subsequently our framework, for using evidence to inform policy development, and overcoming the barriers associated with this.

Framework for using evidence for policy development

Drawing on our experience of advising partnerships on the use of evidence, particularly practitioners involved with handling and reducing teenage pregnancy, we have simplified the process into a tri-pronged framework for collecting, analysing and using data. This framework adopts a developmental approach to the use of evidence, seeing it as a crucial aspect in the development of good policy and sound strategy, as well as providing an evaluative function to enable organisations to establish their current position.

The framework has three core components that make up the process to be undertaken:

Stage 1: Collecting data

Data is unrefined information, either numeric (quantitive) or verbal / textual (qualitative), that reflects the incidence of a particular occurrence, within a given area and at a particular time.

e.g. the number of teenage conceptions and births occurring within Manchester in December 2008. This enables a limited understanding of the scale of the phenomenon, but not what its causes or effects are.

Stage 2: Data analysis

Once data has been collected, it has to be analysed to add meaning to what is being reflected in the numbers / words. This may involve bringing in other data sets to look at relationships between different phenomena, and may often highlight the need for further collection of data (hence stage 1 and 2 are not necessarily discrete stages).

e.g. finding the teenage conception rate from the number of conceptions as a percentage of the total female teenage population will identify how common this phenomenon is, and then comparing this to data sets for other localities will identify if this is a particular problem in the given area, and therefore an issue that needs pressing attention. Finding data on secondary school truancy rates and educational achievement may yield further information about the nature and seriousness of the problem.

Stage 3: Developing conclusions and responses

Once we have information about what the situation is and how it relates to other occurrences, we can develop a wider understanding of the causes and effects of the phenomena. This will link into appropriate contextual and historical information, and enable reasoned assertions to be made about why a problem is happening and what its current and future impacts are likely to be. From conclusions, appropriate responses that take heed of the on the ground situation can be made, tailoring policy and strategy to the delivery what is genuinely needed.

e.g. linking high levels of teenage pregnancy rates and poor educational attainment to high levels of family breakdown, underage drinking, unemployment and low aspiration levels are all explanatory factors for this occurrence within the given area. Appropriate policy responses therefore, would look to find the solutions to the problem through working with schools, Jobcentre Plus and other relevant parties.

Stage 1: Collecting data

The first element of the framework is data. Data are the facts and figures relating to a particular issue – the definition of data encompasses everything that is used to demonstrate the truth of an assertion. Data can be quantitative and qualitative:

- **Quantitative** – based on precise definitions and formally agreed and repeatable methods (e.g. unemployment, economic activity). It is useful to answer the kind of 'where' and 'what' types of questions. Quantitative evidence tells us how common something is, how it varies over time and geographically describing patterns and associations;

- **Qualitative** – better used to define the 'why' and 'how' of something. It helps us to understand what produces changes in a neighbourhood through case studies, opinions of local people and interviews.

The aim of this element of the framework is to identify the full range of data that applies to a particular issue, where that data can be sourced from, and how the data can be used. The key actions associated with the data collection stage include:

- auditing local data sources;
- collecting data initially;
- developing baseline reports around particular issues or themes;

- establishing systems and process to ensure the ongoing collection of data.

It is easier to manage and review data if it is arranged around specific and discrete issues. In the first instance, key thematic areas can be flagged up through collection and collation of as much relevant data as possible about the physical characteristics of the area, the people living in it and the economic circumstances. This can also be enriched by the use of key performance data from the local authority or other relevant body, which might also provide a more in-depth insight into the trends occurring. Once key issues have been identified then it will be possible to develop more detailed locally based data sets around these themes and begin to group data into meaningful categories.

Using local data and evidence can prove challenging as there are limitations relating to:

- the availability of data;
- its timeliness;
- changes in administrative boundaries;
- confidentiality clauses.

The latter of these is of particular note as many data sets that would be needed to inform economic and social regeneration strategy may be subject to confidentiality clauses. Teenage pregnancy is a good example of this, as most of the local data are characterised by small numbers and high levels of confidentiality due to the delicate nature of the issue itself. This is also true for many health related issues such as drug and alcohol treatment, HIV incidence and mental health service uptake, and also for economic data relating to claimancy of state benefits and debt, for example. Data sharing can be an effective way of overcoming these limitations.

<u>Overcoming barriers: data sharing</u>
The most practical way to overcome barriers in the use of local data is to establish and sustain an effective data sharing protocol that includes the range of local data available in all areas. The wide range of quantitative data available at a local level includes data about the economic and social geography of place including demographics, environment, housing, infrastructure, and land use, as well as data about the local population including employment, skills, education, diversity and income. In addition to general data, more specific information will be available relating to different policy fields such as public health, crime and disorder, or the local commercial economy.

In order to gain a full picture of the local context and local phenomena occurring within this (i.e. all relevant data sets), as well as developing a vigorous understanding of what the data means, it is important that partners are able to share data sets. Sharing data is possible as long as you follow some simple rules:

- Most aspects of legislation relevant to sharing data refer to specific data about named individuals. Data Protection legislation (such as the Data Protection Act 1998 which defines a legal basis for the handling in the UK of information relating to living people) should not be a barrier to partnerships sharing data. The aim of the legislation is to prevent public agencies from using data in a way that could be harmful to the individuals the data relates to. Where data relates to confidential and sensitive issues (e.g. individual health, wealth, employment status and any other personal circumstance), disclosure of information should not occur. Without the knowledge of the individual, such disclosure of personal information may cause distress.

- Aggregated personal data (absolute numbers or rates) can be used for research, strategy development and service planning. Confidential data can be shared without breaching confidentiality by anonymising data; this means removing individual identifiers and/or aggregating data by area or time. Anonymising data by area consists of extrapolating data at unit postcode level and then aggregating the data accordingly, whilst anonymising data by time means aggregating data for a number of years.

- Consent is needed to share information for direct targeting of services to individuals.

- Shared data cannot be used if the disclosure of that information would cause damage or distress to individuals.

A number of practical issues may also arise when sharing data, including:

- Different agencies may use different definitions for similar data sources, e.g. different terminology, boundary lines, geographical units, or ethnic groups, and may use different methods of collection depending upon whether the data is for their own use or for other agencies, e.g. in planning surveys.

- Sharing data requires time, effort and possibly financial resources. It is important that adequate resources are put aside to support data sharing. This may involve formal systems, such as IT software, or informal systems, such as working groups.

- Individual attitudes and organisational cultures can often be a barrier to effective data sharing and it is important for coordinators and partnership board members to understand these cultural barriers. Trust is an essential ingredient for good data sharing and partnership work, so it is worth the initial and continuous effort to ensure this is established and maintained between partners.

Stage 2: Data analysis

The second stage of the framework is analysing the data to yield useful information and develop an understanding of the issue. Analysis occurs once data is collected and initially understood at face value, but is also a reiterative feedback process that may arise in further data collection being warranted to obtain more thorough meaning. The aim of the analysis stage is to develop the understanding of the issue by bringing together different data sets, identifying trends, and making comparisons with different data sets over time or across different geographies. This will enable an insight to be gained into what the data means on the ground and what cause and effect relationships are entwined with it.

There are many different ways in which information can be analysed; many statistical methods occur such as means, medians, frequencies, correlations, etc., but there are also a number of analytical tools that can be used. These include software packages such as Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and Geographical Information Systems (GIS). There are also a variety of methodologies that can be used, including the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis and PESTEL (political, economic, social, technical, environmental, legal / regulatory).

Overcoming barriers: presenting findings
One often overlooked aspect of the evidence base is the way that data is presented to different stakeholders. Presentation is the key to enabling different stakeholders to be able to interpret and act upon the data. It is important that careful consideration of the type of audience that is being presented to takes place, and appropriate methods and explanations are used. When reporting findings it is useful to include a narrative, which should then be enriched by graphs and tables illustrating the point made discursively. Presenting evidence effectively means disseminating findings, sharing the understanding, and also getting the buy-in of all the partners involved to facilitate future action.

Stage 3: Developing conclusions and responses

The final stage of the framework is using the data and analysis undertaken to draw conclusions about the nature, causes and effects of a particular situation or scenario, and placing this in the wider context of the locality and local people. From this a clear understanding has been yielded that can usefully inform decision-making about actions to overcome problems and hence appropriate policy / strategy can be developed.

The aim of this stage is to understand why the trends, clusters and patterns identified in the information stage are as they are. The key is to ask and answer the relevant questions, such as:

- What does the information mean for service delivery?
- What are the implications of the results of the analysis?
- What additional data is required to develop the overall strategy?
- What best use can be made of this?

Gathering evidence is only worthwhile if one can act on it. Evidence is important to help clarify needs and priorities and plan more effectively. It can also be a first step to involving communities in regeneration and can demonstrate that what you have done works. The effective use of evidence in policy making is as much about being prepared to ask questions and thinking innovatively about what is being shown as it is about the actual data being used. The value of an effective evidence base is often predicated by the extent to which it is used to generate meaning amongst practitioners and inform future action.

When the use of data and evidence are linked to service planning processes, then the attitudes towards collating data, identifying resources to enable the analysis and participating in the process are more positive. This is why it is important to share data and present the findings effectively, as gathering consensus means also understanding the links between different issues and developing a shared sense of ownership.

This is at the basis of effective partnership working, where issues are considered in their multifaceted nature. The conclusion and response stage is where the link between evidence, strategy and delivery should be made. Connecting this with wider structures, such as community planning, can be a good way to encourage joint working. Working together can reduce duplication of effort and get the most out of available resources and time. One of the key considerations in this stage is how different partners who may have stake in the process can be engaged. It is important that the following points are considered in order to ensure local partners are engaged in the process of developing an evidence base:

- **Clarity of role, remit and purpose -** Ensuring that evidence processes tie into operational and planning timescales of all the partners, and also ensuring that partners have a clear understanding of the purpose behind developing the evidence base. This should be explicit at the start of the process.

- **Less performance and more research driven -** Many local partnerships find that much of their emphasis around the collection of data and statistics focuses on performance monitoring, meaning data and evidence is used to retrospectively review what has already happened. People generally find that focusing on the future where there are opportunities to make a difference is more stimulating than simply look at whether what has already been done was successful.

- **Promote exchange of analysts as well as data -** Developing opportunities for individuals from different agencies will add value to the analysis of evidence across the partnership. This could be done through staff secondments or providing opportunities for staff to work on joint projects together.

- **Strategic leadership -** Strategic buy-in is advantageous to the process of developing an evidence base because:
    - the evidence base is a tool which management can use in order to plan and shape service delivery;
    - enable senior management to shape the evidence base;
    - senior management can be useful resource for testing out some of the assumptions and issues raised within the evidence base;
    - involving senior management helps to ensure that practical problems such as issues relating to data sharing can be resolved more quickly.

The process of actually engaging people in the debate around data often has an intrinsic value in terms of raising awareness amongst stakeholders not just about the data they have access to, but also to the activities in which they are involved. In terms of partnership development, discussions around data can often be a subject on which to base wider thinking and activity to promote better communications, collaboration and joint delivery. It is important however, not to let the discussion become too focused on the technicalities of data collection and sharing.

Lessons learnt

Whilst using evidence and data may be easy to describe on paper, this does not always translate into effective practice on the ground. CLES Consulting has worked with many organisations that highlight a lack of robust evidence at a local level as a key barrier to developing effective policy solutions to a range of different issues. The framework outlined above can be applied to a number of settings. CLES Consulting has used it recently to provide advice and support to teenage pregnancy partnerships in London and the North West. This framework of data collection, analysis and conclusions was used as a diagnostic tool to help the partnerships understand where they could improve their use of data – by compartmentalising the process into the three stages of the framework, an evaluation of strengths and weaknesses in the current system could be identified.

There are many lessons that can be learnt from the way in which different partnerships have approached the use of data and evidence. In this final section, we bring together some of the key messages taken from the work that CLES Consulting has done with teenage pregnancy partnerships, around:

- partnership working;
- including front line staff;
- using qualitative and quantitative data;
- using local data.

Message 1: Partnership working

Partnerships that had the most effective approach to using data and evidence were generally the ones that had the strongest arrangements in place. Many partnerships had established specific sub groups, which were focused on improving the approach to collecting and using data. Where sub groups had been established they were generally focused on technical aspects of data collection such as establishing systems for sharing data between partners.

Partnership groups have proved to be an effective way of ensuring that different stakeholders are aware of the data. Complex social policy issues such as teenage pregnancy will inevitably draw in a wide range of stakeholders. Often individual stakeholders will have little detailed understanding of what data and evidence other stakeholders can access. Bringing people together in a single group can provide the opportunity for people to learn about what other data is available and think about how it may link to data sets they themselves have access to.

Message 2: Include the front line staff

The processes that prove to be most effective in terms of improving the understanding of local issues are those that involve front line staff in both the collection and analysis of data and information. Front line staff can often bring insights into data that cannot be seen from looking at the numbers alone. Front line staff can also use data and evidence to improve what they do.

There are many ways in which front line staff are able to contribute to the collection and analysis of data. For instance, they can directly provide data through the analysis of case notes and they are also well placed to bring more qualitative perspectives to analysis. Front line staff are often able to make a key contribution to the development of the evidence base and their role in both contributing to and using data and evidence. Front line staff will often have their own knowledge that can provide valuable insights into trends and patterns highlighted in the data. Front line staff are also often most able to respond to the evidence by altering service delivery patterns.

Message 3: Using qualitative and quantitative data
Taking an evidence-based approach to developing social policy implies extending the use of data to include more sources, including anecdotal evidence. Given the complex nature of many social and economic policy issues, it is not appropriate to rely solely on quantitative data as it only gives a partial picture. Qualitative data is important because it provides insight into issues. Evidence is often seen as statistics and numbers, but perceptions, views and experiences can also be valuable. There are many ways to collect and record experiences, stories and views (for example, interviews, questionnaires and focus groups) which also may help to break down barriers to local people getting involved in regeneration projects.

Message 4: Using local data
By local data we mean all that is produced locally by partners operating in an area. Sources of data include statistics and evidence generated form local service providers, which may be about service use or client profiles. A mapping exercise of local services and related data is a useful way to understand the extent of the provision and the plethora of data it can provide. This data can also improve the baseline work resulting from nationally available data sources, which are always limited particularly in their timeliness. Administrative data sources are robust sources of data, regularly available, for very small geographical unit (including postcodes) and more detailed in the variety of information they can provide.

Conclusions

This Local Work has outlined a basic framework, which can be applied to a variety of circumstances, which facilitates the process of transforming data into information and intelligence. The purpose of this Local Work was to explore how partnerships can develop evidence more effectively, building on the experience of CLES Consulting in applying the framework to a number of policy areas, including teenage pregnancy. CLES Consulting has used this framework effectively as a means to provide advice and guidance to teenage pregnancy partnerships in London and more recently in the North West.

The framework is built around three core stages: collecting data; data analysis; and developing conclusions and responses, and this framework can be extended to any element of economic development and regeneration. It is based on the understanding that data is *one* aspect of the process of establishing a comprehensive evidence base that should take into account both hard and soft evidence. It is also important to understand that the evidence base is there to inform decision-making and improve it, not to hinder it or become the sole purpose of it.

From CLES Consulting's experience of using this framework in the context of teenage pregnancy, a number of key messages emerge. Firstly, strong partnership working is important for an effective approach to using data and evidence, whilst engaging with frontline staff can offer insights into numerical data from their experience on the ground. Utilising both qualitative and quantitative data can offer a fuller picture than relying on one type of data alone, whilst finally, a mapping exercise of local services and related data is a useful way to understand the extent of data available.

This Local Work presents a framework that enables partnerships to develop an effective use of evidence to design interventions and manage performance. It is based on understanding the value of data and approaching data collection in a very comprehensive manner, and therefore including a variety of sources. It also highlights the importance of analysing data to get robust information, identifying hot spots and trends, and presenting the results effectively in order to get buy-in by all the potential partners and then link this to the wider strategy. Finally, it is worth reasserting that the importance of evidence should not be underestimated. Evidence is what informs the debate around prioritises, targets and monitoring performance, and ensures better project development and supports management and planning.

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Centre for Local Economic Strategies & CLES Consulting
Express Networks • 1 George Leigh Street • Manchester M4 5DL
tel 0161 236 7036 • **fax** 0161 236 1891 • info@cles.org.uk • www.cles.org.uk