Measurement of Place-Based Working

Report for

CORRA FOUNDATION

Contents

1. Introduction

Corra Foundation has been funded by the Scottish Government to undertake a project with the intent of informing more effective place-based working (PBW) in Scotland. The objective is to achieve: '*a greater understanding of the importance of place, which is required to create enabling conditions for communities to thrive and what the policy agenda is that supports effective place-based approaches.*'

Corra Foundation brought together a cross-sector group of 20-25 people working in a place-based way, to work on this over five months. As part of this process, Corra Foundation commissioned EKOS to produce a short thought piece on the issues relating to the measurement of place-based working. The reflections presented here have been informed by a brief review of selected literature, and conversations with a number of researchers and practitioners involved in PBW, and were presented at an event hosted by Corra Foundation on 27 March 2018.

Place-Based Working

PBW is a somewhat slippery concept, understood to mean different things by different people. We have observed examples presented as PBW that are arguably better described as a single service delivered in a particular place (e.g. a local childcare programme) alongside more complex collaborative endeavours to transform places across multiple fronts.

Corra Foundation took as its starting point a statement by Lankelly Chase:

"The term 'place based', … is currently used to describe a range of approaches, from grant-making in a specific geographic area to long-term, multifaceted collaborative partnerships aimed at achieving significant change. In most cases, it is more than just a term to describe the target location of funding; it also describes a style and philosophy of approach which seeks to achieve 'joined-up' systems change."[1]

This chimes with our own views and, in particular, the point about style and philosophy of approach is pertinent. In a broad (and very useful) review of PBW and

---

[1] http://lankellychase.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Historical-review-of-place-based-approaches.pdf p6 from Anheier and Leat (2006); Association for the Study and Development of Community (2007).

their measurement, the Government of Canada[2] identified a number of characteristics of PBW that seems, more or less, to capture this style and philosophy. In their analysis, PBW:

- are designed (or adapted) locally to meet unique conditions;

- engage participants from a diverse range of sectors and jurisdictions in collaborative decision making processes;

- are opportunity-driven, dependent on local talent, resources and constraints;

- have an evolving process due to adaptive learning and stakeholder interests;

- attempt to achieve synergies by integrating across silos, jurisdictions and dimensions of sustainability;

- leverage assets and knowledge through shared ownership of the initiative; and

- frequently attempt to achieve behaviour change.

To this we might add some further defining characteristics, such as:

- a focus on addressing complex challenges with multiple variables and interdependencies (often called 'wicked' problems);

- an emphasis on shared goals and outcomes;

- the degree to which PBW initiatives are highly context-dependent and specific; and

- an understanding of the process as an open, adaptive system subject to change and external influences.

While this does not quite provide clarify of definition, and clearly allows for a very diverse range of activities and initiatives, it does help to frame some of the challenges inherent in seeking to measure the progress and effects of PBW.

---

[2] *The Evaluation of Place-Based Approaches: Questions for further research,* Policy Horizons, Government of Canada, June 2011

2. Measurement Challenges

Inherent Challenges

The typical characteristics of PBW present some clear challenges to effective measurement. These are relatively consistent across the literature and include:

- PBW can have multiple and diverse outcomes, making effective measurement unwieldy and difficult to implement;

- the focus on behavioural change presents challenges in defining suitable measures, with discomfort in some quarters with more qualitative measures;

- PBW objectives are often long term in nature, and sustaining measurement effort and resources can be challenging;

- the multitude of stakeholders often introduces different measurement expectations and requirements, and issues around who claims what;

- open, adaptive systems are subject to often unpredictable change, which is one of their strengths, but this makes consistent measurement and evaluation hard; and

- baseline data can be patchy and inconsistent due to limited availability at small geographic levels, or inconsistent geographical disaggregation of data.

These are difficult, but not necessarily insurmountable issues, assuming sufficient resources, capacity and expertise (of which more later).

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of all is **attributing change** at the place level to the PBW activities. As noted, places are subject to a broad range of influences, many of which are beyond the control, or even the knowledge, of the PBW initiative. Thus, drawing a direct causal relationship between change at the place level (e.g. a community) and the efforts of PBW is difficult.

In experimental or quasi-experimental research designs, this issue is addressed through counterfactual analysis using control groups. The control group is not subject to the intervention and therefore provides evidence of what would have happened in its absence. However, in PBW the use of control groups is not always possible and indeed raises ethical issues if valuable support is being withheld from one group in the community and not another.

In traditional evaluation processes this is more often tackled through post-intervention research with beneficiaries, which seeks their views as to the extent to which the intervention led to the observed changes. This is obviously subject to a degree of respondent bias but nonetheless remains a mainstay of traditional evaluation.

Practical Challenges

One observation we have is that much of the literature is quite academic in nature and assumes considerable knowledge of research design and practice. It also often describes measurement systems and approaches that are, or appear to be, well-resourced. In practice, measurement, and its close cousin evaluation, are often not well resourced.

More pragmatically, any measurement approach that is developed needs to be proportionate, and recognise the resource constraints under which many PBW initiatives are working. What might be feasible for a well-resourced city initiative will not be appropriate in a small community.

A further practical challenge is that of data. We conducted a brief review of selected data sources available in Scotland across key policy issues of interest to PBW. This analysis is provided as a separate spreadsheet. At the risk of over-simplifying the situation, the picture with respect to data can only be described as patchy and inconsistent. Across areas such as housing, health, crime, socio-economic conditions and education, the geographic levels at which data are available, their reliability and their frequency over time are all inconsistent. The result is that for some PBW, some data will not be available at all, while other data may be available but inconsistent. In any case, using population level data sources such as the Census is more useful in diagnosing the issues (and setting a baseline position) than it is in tracking change as this runs head long into the problems of attributing changes to PBW activity. This does not mean it is without value, but these limitations should be acknowledged.

Time frames are also an issue. Measuring what is often generational change is inherently difficult, but even more so in the context of shorter term political cycles. PBW is highly dependent on political support and usually on public funding. Thus, proponents of the approach need to be in a position to demonstrate effectiveness and impact within shorter time frames in order to maintain political commitment. This is a challenge to which there is no easy solution.

This then raises the question of the purpose of measurement in the first place, as discussed below.

It also raises a related issue insofar as the language of government decision making remains largely quantitative and economic. Many within the PBW community would (rightly) note the importance of qualitative measures in assessing social change, but qualitative data does not have the same currency as the quantitative. In part this is because techniques such as economic impact assessment and cost benefit analysis are well established and, as such, can generate comparative data that can be used in policy decisions. Despite the multiplicity of robust qualitative analysis methods and techniques, none have achieved such universal adoption and, as a result, are often considered nice to have but not as important as quantifiable measures.

There is no easy answer to these issues, but rather they underline the truism that measurement in this context will never be truly perfect. Indeed, there are always trade-offs and compromises involved in research and evaluation, and the quest for the ideal method should not be a barrier to experimentation or effort.

3. Purpose of Measurement

Measurement in this context can be considered to fall into one of three broad categories each with a different purpose:

- to drive behaviour and support continuous improvement (we might describe this as performance measurement or performance management);

- to assess and report on progress e.g. to funders/ government (project/ programme monitoring); and

- to assess and understand the impacts of interventions and identify useful learning for future activity (evaluation).

They are not mutually exclusive and indeed an effective system would contain elements of all three. They are, however, different in nature and implementation.

Performance Measurement

Effective performance measurement systems typically have certain characteristics:

- they are relatively simple with a manageable number of specific measures;

- the measures are usually specific to the circumstances and are meaningful in relation to the activities;

- they allow for regular reporting and feedback to inform ongoing improvement or changes in practice; and

- the measures conform to a clear theory of change that connects progress to later targeted outcomes (if we do more of X then we will achieve Y).

A useful example of this in practice is that provided by the Magnolia Community Initiative[3] summarised in **Box 3.1** below.

---

[3] *The Magnolia Community Initiative: The Importance of Measurement in Improving Community Well-Being*, Inkelas, M. and Bowie, P., University of California, 2014

Box 3.1: Magnolia Community Initiative

The Magnolia Community Initiative is a network of 70 public and voluntary organisations which came together with the shared goal of improving child well-being within the deprived community of Magnolia in Los Angeles.

Working with the University of California, the network developed a measurement and learning system focussed on shared outcomes and with the objective of improving practice through a systems approach. They developed a Population Dashboard including the following types of measures:

- **outcomes**, including early life predictors of future success in adulthood;
- the health and development promoting **behaviours** of parents and community members;
- the family and neighbourhood **conditions** that support and facilitate positive behaviours;
- the **actions** that networks partners can take to support the right conditions and behaviours; and
- **reach** as a measure of the extent to which the target population in linked to the system.

The dashboard focused on a relatively small number of measures (10-15 is considered optimal), and were mainly bespoke rather than drawn from existing datasets in order to be meaningful to changing practice. Real time monthly progress reports provided ongoing pointers for change, and the structure encouraged actors across the community to see themselves as a system for change.

The example from Magnolia is instructive and offers useful pointers for performance measurement systems in relation to:

- shared commitment across the partners;

- ensuring that measures have meaning for participants in the system;

- a framework that connects actions, conditions and behaviours to the intended outcomes in a causal way; and

- effort and consistency in its application, together with real time and meaningful reporting to inform changes in practice and behaviour.

What is most striking and most impressive about Magnolia is the extent to which a well designed and implemented measurement system actually started to drive changes in behaviour rather than simply measuring them. This should be regarded as the goal of effective performance measurement.

Project Monitoring

Project monitoring frameworks typically seek to gather data at regular intervals to track the progress of projects and programmes toward their objectives. There is overlap with performance measurement systems, and indeed the two are often confused, but monitoring is more often used (in our experience) to report to stakeholders (usually funders).

Monitoring frameworks often follow a routes to impact approach - a logic model that starts with the inputs to a project (usually financial and human) the activities that these inputs support the immediate effects of these activities (outputs) and the eventual outcomes/ impacts. This is shown below:

Routes to Impact Model

Inputs → Activities → Outputs → Outcomes/ Impacts
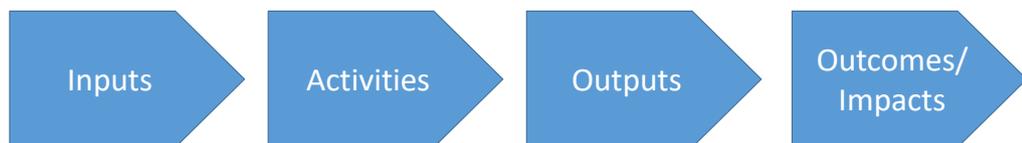
In practice, our experience is that the first two categories of measures are where monitoring practice usually focusses, and the collection of outputs and outcome/ impact data is far less common. This is, of course, because it is more difficult and more costly.

In contrast to the Magnolia example above, monitoring frameworks can tend towards complexity with partners often insisting on the inclusion of their own measures. In the context of PBW this could quickly get out of hand.

Evaluation

Done properly, evaluation should accommodate both performance measurement and monitoring systems together with pre- and post-test assessment against identified outcomes and impacts. The purpose of evaluation is to understand what happened (did the programme achieve what is set out to do?) and identify learning that can inform future practice.

Different approaches and methods are available, some of which include:

- **Theory of change** – articulates the hypothesised pathways of change from input and activity through immediate and intermediate changes to final outcomes, providing a basis for evaluation planning. This underpins the routes to impact model above, and logic model approaches;

- **Development evaluation** – a more iterative process which evolves alongside the programme being evaluated rather than as a stand-alone stage in the programme delivery cycle. This has a focus on learning and includes specific approaches such as participatory evaluation and realist evaluation. It can however raise issues with the objectivity of the evaluator; and

- **Traditional evaluation** – traditional evaluation methods tend to be a pint in time assessment (ex-ante, mid-term or ex-post) and will typically include primary research to establish the effects of the intervention.

Within these broad typologies there is a very wide variety of tools and techniques than can be used to tackle specific research challenges. Examples would include different data collection methods from surveys to participant observation and from focus groups to activity diaries. Other examples include methods to manage qualitative data or to value non-market goods and services. Here the field overlaps with that of social impact measurement and methods such as social accounting and social return on investment which seek to allocate financial values to social benefits.

Comment on these various methods is beyond the scope of this work, but clearly the evaluation of complex and adaptive systems should make use of a full range of data collection and analytical tools to meet its requirements.

4. Current Practice

We have by no means completed a comprehensive review of evaluation approaches taken in PBW in Scotland and elsewhere, not least as this would also overlap with areas such as regeneration and preventative spend research – both in themselves large fields. However, through our consultation work and literature review, we have arrived at a broad view of the field which we have tested through the stakeholder interviews and at the March 27 event.

Essentially the measurement and/ or evaluation of PBW has tended to take one of two approaches:

- **process evaluations** in which the focus has typically been on the extent and quality of collaborative working. These approaches tend to be largely qualitative (albeit with some measurement of investment made into collaborative working) using a variety of qualitative methods; or

- **outcome measurement** using existing data sources at population level to assess the extent of change over time against key indicators (e.g. unemployment, demographic patterns, health outcomes etc). This, as noted earlier, only measures change in a place and not change as a result of any specific intervention (the attribution issue).

That is not say that there are no examples of good practice, For example, work in Perth and Kinross[4] adopted a data-led approach to restructuring children's services in the region to target support at those most in need (see Box 4.1), and Glasgow Centre for Population Health is trialling new approaches to evaluation of PBW focussed on childcare in the East End of Glasgow. Similarly, stakeholders noted the good work of regeneration projects in this respect including the work of organisations like Clyde Gateway.

Nonetheless, it is hard to escape the conclusion that measurement of PBW in Scotland (and arguably elsewhere) is generally limited and lacking in a consistent method, or indeed a consistent set of principles. As noted in a recent report by the Improvement Service:

---

[4] *Building Better Outcomes for Children through Evidence Based Practice: An evaluation of the Evidence2Success project in Perth and Kinross*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2016

"It is unclear from our review of the literature just how effective place-based approaches are, due to the relative lack of substantive evidence on impact."[5]

Box 4.1: Perth and Kinross

Evidence2Success (E2S) is an international initiative aimed at improving children's welfare and well-being, piloted with a cross-agency partnership in Perth and Kinross. Through the use of targeted primary research, the project aimed to examine the targeting and reach of children's services and map this against the expressed needs of children and their families. The initial research and data exercise identified a significant mismatch between the targeting of exiting services and the distribution of need, and articulated a model of targeted support in line with the findings.

The project is ongoing, and an initial evaluation has focussed mainly on process and implementation, but there are positive signs of early progress. In particular, the project has used focussed research to identify unmet needs and scope for preventative services and has helped inform an appropriate response across the partnership. This demonstrates the importance of evidence-led service development and of clear baseline activity in seeking to effect change.

There is no shortage of data, nor of tools to measure and assess places against a wide range of measures. The Place Standard Tool developed by Architecture and Design Scotland in partnership with the NHS and Scottish Government[6] is a useful self-assessment tool, and the Understanding Scottish Places platform managed by Scotland's Town Partnerships[7] also provides details of how to conduct a local audit combining a variety of indicators against different thematic areas. These, however, are of greater use in diagnosing the issues than measuring the effectiveness of any solutions.

Collective Impact

The Collective Impact approach[8] was first developed by Stanford University and is based on the notion that addressing complex social problems requires organisations to work collaboratively towards a shared goal - essentially the philosophy than underpins PBW. This has since grown into a movement, and has identified five fundamental requirements for effective collective impact work:

---

[5] *Place-Based Approaches to Joint Planning, Resourcing and Delivery: An 0verview of current practice in Scotland*, Improvement Service, 2016.
[6] https://placestandard.scot/
[7] http://www.scotlandstowns.org/understanding-scottish-places
[8] http://collectiveimpactforum.org/

- common agenda (for the problem and interventions);

- shared measurement systems;

- mutually reinforcing systems;

- continuous communication; and

- backbone support organisation.

The Magnolia initiative would be an example of a collective impact approach, and these requirements are useful in the context of PBW measurement. However, there are also issues to consider with the structure of the measurement frameworks or systems adopted. We consider these issues in the section below.

5. Measuring PBW

It is not the purpose of this brief review to design a method for measuring the effectiveness of PBW. However, we have some suggestions regarding the principles that should be considered.

First, it is important to be clear about the purpose of measurement, and we suggest that three issues are important:

- informing and supporting improvements in practice and delivery;

- reporting to stakeholders and demonstrating progress, even if that is not to the stage of achieving long term outcomes (intermediate progress measures); and

- building an evidence base to demonstrate the effectiveness and added value of PBW models.

It is then important to define the shared goal(s) and build a common understanding of these goals and how they might be achieved. This is a time consuming and challenging process that requires partner organisations to move beyond their own organisational concerns (and KPIs) to build a theory of change model that is highly specific to the shared goals and the context (the place).

As noted, much of the effort thus far has focussed on the process and the eventual outcomes (attribution problems notwithstanding). What is missing is the section in between that articulates the sets of activities and intermediate measures that lead to the outcomes. Effective collaboration is an input and an activity but not an output in terms of community benefit. It is therefore not sufficient to demonstrate good collaborative working if there is no link to the activities and practices that collaborative working supports, and then to how those activities lead to changes that support the achievement of the intended outcomes. The theory of change model needs to be populated with clear causal links across different categories of measures (the routes to Collective Impact or the Magnolia example are both useful models but they are not the only ones).

This is the most challenging stage, and there is a need to accept some principles. First qualitative measures are OK, and not everything needs to be economic or financial. PBW is often most fundamentally about behavioural change and as such

should not shy away from measures of such, even if they are difficult to define. Secondly, targets are important as they establish an expectation of change and provide a benchmark for assessing progress. Third, the framework must remain manageable and not seek to measure everything possible. Otherwise it will become too difficult to implement and will not be completed. Measures also need to have real world relevance. This may mean that they are specific to the context and that they also require new data collection methods.

The timeframe of many PBW initiatives is also of relevance here. The earlier point about mismatch between long tern change projects and political cycles is important, as projects need to have something to report even if the longer term outcomes will not yet be achieved. This is where intermediate measure of progress and change can be helpful. Good progress here can provide evidence that the PBW initiative is on track and delivering as it should, even if the long term outcomes are still to be delivered.

Finally, baseline analysis is important in two respects. First it helps to diagnose the issues to be addressed (the Perth and Kinross example is a good one in this respect). Secondly, it provides a starting position against which future change can be assessed. Baselines can make use of existing population level data sources, but as noted earlier, this will involve some compromise. They can also include primary data collection, and indeed should do if resources can be made available.

An evaluation framework could then include regular baseline updates (say every five years for a programme with 20 year ambitions) with a logic model based measurement framework running alongside these updates on a continuous basis (this is shown in **Figure 5.1**, over).

Once a suitable framework has been developed and agreed, then a mechanism for its implementation needs to be agreed. This is the collective impact backbone organisation that can drive progress in the collaborative project but can also lead the measurement approach. There are inevitable resource issues to be tackled here, but if measurement is relegated to an afterthought then we should not be surprised if it falls short of expectations.

Figure 5.1: Outline Evaluation Model
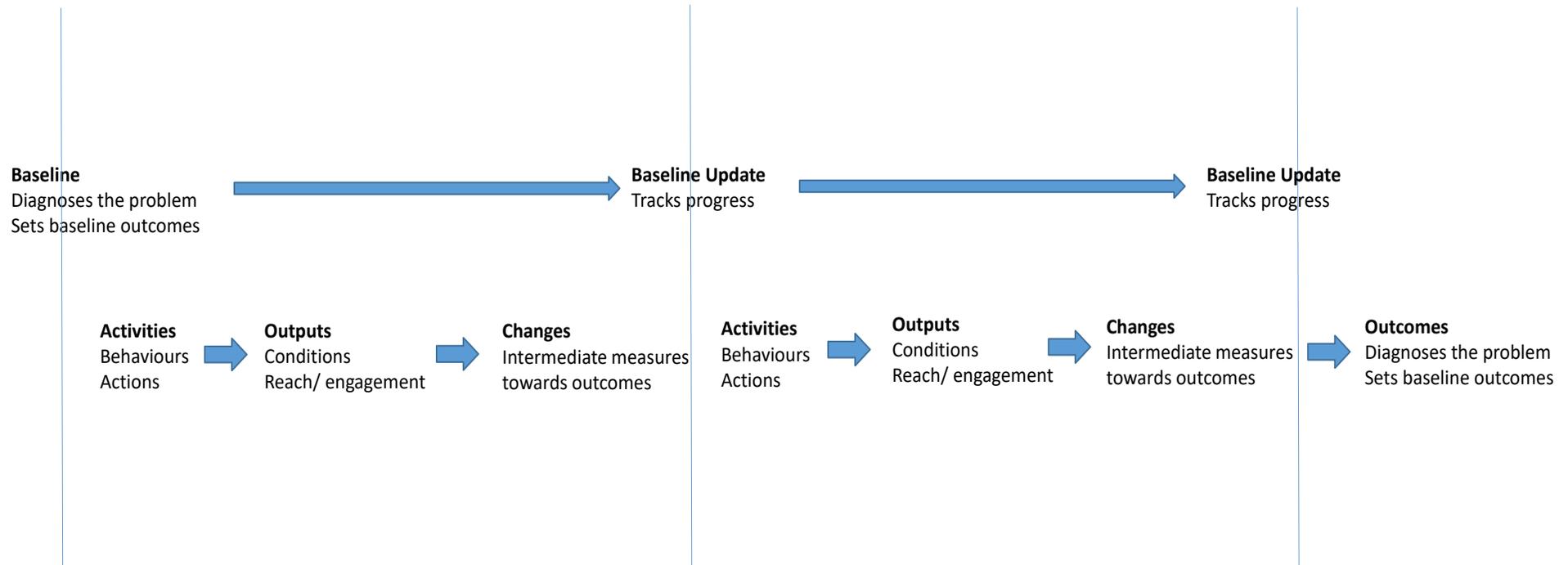
6. Final Comments

This paper has attempted to provide a brief overview of a very broad topic and, as such, cannot hope to do it justice. Nonetheless, input from Corra Foundation and informed stakeholders has confirmed that the findings generally chime with experience.

Measuring the effectiveness of PBW is both extremely challenging and extremely important. We have seen how measurement can inform changes in practice, drive behaviour and support change, but it can also demonstrate the value of properly collaborative effort. In a time of unprecedented pressure on public finance, and escalating demand for services, it has never been more important to ensure that scarce resources are properly targeted and practice informed by evidence. Effective systems of measurement are the means to that end.

More work needs to be done on developing robust and consistent methods for evaluating complex collaborative initiatives, and to communicate the findings to policy makers. Importantly, the status of more qualitative measures needs to be elevated, along with acknowledgement of the time frames involved in trying to make real changes in communities. This is an argument both for longer term resourcing to allow projects to deliver on their promise, but also for more robust and meaningful measurement that can provide comfort that things are on track to meeting their objectives.