

From the work, through the work: our equitable evaluation approach for the Making it Happen programme

Evaluators are objective experts and final arbiters, working retrospectively with data that matters because it can be counted. Sound familiar? At Collaborate, we take a different, more developmental and equitable approach – rather than extracting the data we think is valuable and analysing it in ways that only reflect our own ideas of what constitutes success or impact, we move ‘from the work, through the work’.

Our position on evaluation

We’ve supported many organisations and partnerships to navigate complexity and collectively surface insights that help enable equitable and systemic change.

For us, evaluation is a participative and generative journey we go on with partners, clients and research participants. We understand it to be an **ongoing, active process as opposed to something delivered solely through outputs or as a final product**. We subscribe to the maxim that “the process you use to get to the future is the future you get”.¹ And **this process is centred on relationships**, recognising that learning and change are a collective social activity.

We don’t see evaluation as a passive or extractive exercise. Instead, we aim to **play an enabling role, helping people reflect on progress** as well as bringing constructive challenge. We believe learning and evaluation must be inclusive and attentive to power dynamics in terms of who gets to decide what counts as data and to be part of producing knowledge.

When we evaluate, we **explore underlying system conditions** like mindsets that are enabling or inhibiting outcomes. We hold that the historical, political and cultural contexts in which outcomes are produced are important to understanding how those outcomes have come about.

We are among many who believe that evaluative practice should consider and progress equity through the questions asked, methods used, teams assembled, and ways of making sense of and using findings. The [Equitable Evaluation Framework™](#) sets this out clearly and our friends at Renaisi have a great [model](#) for place-based and systems change evaluation.

This year, Kamna Muralidharan (Director of Grants Development at Buttle UK) gave a [keynote](#) at Charity Evaluation Working Group’s Festival of Impact and Evaluation, and emphasised that “evaluation culture that privileges certain types of knowledge over others – where sense-making is too often shaped by norms that are ableist, classist, sexist, and racist” and how “when we talk about ‘evaluating change,’ we often mean ‘measuring conformity.’”

¹ Myron Rogers – Myron’s Maxims. <https://www.heartoftheheart.org/?p=1196>

Are enough of us practitioners talking about what it looks like to shift power in evaluation in order that we are not simply measuring conformity? Below, we share reflections from recently completed work as evaluation and learning partner for Making it Happen (MiH), an asset-based community development programme in East Sussex, as a way of sharing and being accountable to this practice.

From the work, through the work

We established what has become a guiding principle for Collaborate's evaluation approach ('from the work, through the work') for the MiH evaluation to ensure that we organically embedded learning into the programme activities. We hoped that the evaluation could be not an activity in addition to the work, but part of the work itself.

Commissioned by East Sussex County Council's (ESCC) Public Health department, MiH sought to reduce health inequalities and bolster people's capacity to thrive and lead healthy lives, taking an asset-based community development (ABCD) approach to this. MiH brought 15 Community Development Workers (CDWs) on board at five local organisations to work in neighbourhoods with high deprivation but also local assets and opportunities. CDWs got alongside people and to help them start and grow all different kinds of groups, projects and events, acting as trusted advisors, connectors and advocates.

We set out to explore if, how, and why MiH worked and for whom, in the areas where it was delivered. We co-developed an analytical framework called the 'Four Shifts' model with those involved in the programme, including by **reflecting CDWs' own theories of change**. The framework maps four shifts towards more asset-based ways of working along various levels or scales at which shifts may take place. This framework was clear and practical, and even became a form of shorthand in conversations between CDWs, at the five partner organisations, and at ESCC, marrying theory and practice.

As we were developing the analytical framework for the evaluation, we were part of conversations that gave us insight into how people were working on MiH and their experience of the evaluation up to that point (as there was another evaluator in the first stage). We discussed how we could adapt the evaluation to support an asset-based approach and **use it to equip communities with new tools for their own learning** – mirroring MiH itself as an ABCD programme.

CDWs asked that we focus on adapting already established processes rather than creating new reporting processes and that language used in the evaluation be more accessible for them and community members. We reviewed processes and suggested adaptations on a rolling and flexible basis. We adapted evidence collection methods to gather data from participants and lead facilitators as well as CDWs, **focused on making the most of what was already in place**.

Over the years of the evaluation, we attended events, facilitated workshops, administered surveys, collected stories and reviewed spreadsheets. When it came to writing the final report, the MiH programme management team and CDWs contributed to the data coding, which resulted in more **co-produced analysis informed by their greater proximity to programme activities**. Additionally, we held a number of joint sensemaking sessions across our work on the evaluation, with lead facilitators of projects, CDWs, and ESCC, community organisation and NHS colleagues, as well as representatives from the Academic Advisory Group to the project. **Sensemaking sessions were a check on our own biases and ensured a richness of perspectives**. We were continually aware of our own position as researchers, and tried to examine our influence at every stage of the research process in a reflexive way.

Why we pursued this approach and where we're at

We did all of this because, firstly, **we wanted to bring the people closest to the activities on the ground into the heart of the evaluation process** by using data collection and analysis methods that would enable them to capture meaningful evidence and be part of the learning. This shifted who was acknowledged and invited as having expertise, and came from a place of trusting that people having power to interpret their own experiences and context would enhance the work.

Bringing people into the evaluation process in this way can **keep the resource burden on the evaluator**. Rather than asking those working on the ground like CDWs to spend time and energy making sense of how to fit their work into a strict and removed evaluation framework, they can reflect and learn in ways that work for them.

Additionally, **we also sought to maximise the value of our involvement by developing evaluation and learning capacity**. This came from a motivation to ensure long-term mutual benefit and reciprocity. For instance, we hosted a workshop on developing skills, knowledge and tools to tell powerful stories about the impact of community led development for people who have helped set up and support MiH projects. Alongside this, we supported senior stakeholders to understand how to interpret the information being generated to influence broader local system change.

Finally, **it was important to us to ensure our research would add value** to the communities of East Sussex. We implemented collective sensemaking at various points to bring together different perspectives and foster a collective, forward-looking conversation. In these moments, people came together to make sense of the data and build shared understanding and ownership as a foundation for collective action.

Of course, there were sticky points. In the beginning, we struggled to find our footing in terms of adapting the language of the evaluation to make sense for community members. When we realised that the survey for people who had been participants in groups, projects and events wasn't working well enough to involve their voices in the evaluation, we set out to host workshops, but the inaccessible and insufficient transportation infrastructure

couldn't get them across the county and they had more trust in the facilitator(s) of the activity they were involved in.

We adapted to these challenges, adopting more resonant language and developing a workshop plan and set of questions that CDWs and project facilitators could use when and how they saw fit. We would have ideally done more than meet people where they were at in our language and approach and actually gone to meet people where they physically were more. We could have gone further in other ways, too.

Out of concern that it would be offputting and impede trust, the programme did not systematically collect information on participating individuals' identities and protected characteristics. Grant delivery plans and "meaningful connections" data provided an indication of for whom activities were intended and we heard what made people feel welcome and why. However, despite that we knew activities were for disabled people, ethnically diverse and migrant communities, LGBTQ+ individuals and families etc., we did not have the data to understand their experiences through an intersectional lens.

This is important because we could tell that people were facing multiple barriers to participation at once. For instance, someone who was disabled, unable to afford a car and living in a rural area without access to reliable and accessible transport options was going to have a particularly difficult time getting to a MiH event (both programme- and evaluation-related). This is something we'll be thinking about as we continually hone our approach.

Bonus: what we've learned from MiH about learning

One of the most fascinating things about being part of the MiH programme was to witness 'why' the programme worked, which included the culture of learning that developed. We recognised and underscored early in our evaluation that adopting a learning approach would be essential for all involved in the programme, as there is never a direct line between inputs and outcomes in work like this. Instead, we must situate ourselves in an environment that is constantly changing and adapt accordingly.

CDWs had infrastructures of peer support, including meetings across organisational teams, which allowed them time for "reflections, asking for help, sharing what has worked well and also offering a space for people who come up against barriers and need some ideas" (said one CDW). The culture of learning extended even beyond the CDWs. As we wrote in the final report, "Community groups themselves have played a role in leading learning and embedding ABCD informally and in ways that treat knowledge as a process of inquiry." We also saw a growing capacity to reflect about how the wider system (civil society and public sector organisations) in East Sussex operates and could operate.

Learning from community groups and networks extended to building shared understanding of what was going on in their place, how to make things happen there, and what needed to change. They did their own community storytelling, deciding what was important for them.

Their learning stayed within their communities and informed their actions rather than having been extracted to inform prescribed solutions.

Community Table events allowed MiH projects in Eastbourne to connect, network, learn, exchange ideas, share their successes and challenges and leave a legacy of collaboration among local groups while the People's Knowledge Exchange highlighted the contributions of grassroots community organisations, created cross-sector conversations and encouraged new collaborations and to shape future town planning and public services. Blueprint to Beyond, a group of projects in Hastings that work locally to improve health and wellbeing, are developing a learning community to explore where and how asset-based approaches can be strengthened, blending experiential learning with reflective practice.

Rother Art and Creative Network started linking local creative projects together to form a network, sharing experiences, stories and local knowledge, identifying priorities for action, exploring the appetite for continuing to learn together and creating a diorama of community collaboration. A community picnic event at Rye Community Garden of groups from eastern Rother and beyond and a network of growers called Growing Together have each built on the relationships that came about through connections and support/funding from MiH.

To the extent that our approach to learning and evaluation for the programme nurtured this culture of learning, we are honoured, and we are grateful that the programme management team and commissioner were invested in learning and development along the way. But more than that, we end our work on this programme with a renewed appreciation for peer learning and learning communities on the ground and amongst practitioners, which has been a significant feature of the MiH programme.

Three things we believe enabled this culture of learning across MiH are:

1. **'Permission' for different groups and projects to visit, seek advice from and collaborate and work alongside each other.** This came, at least in part, from CDW making connections and an environment of lessened competition for funding.
2. **Reassurance that CDWs could 'fail' and adapt** – validated not just through their own individual reflection or reflection with a supervisor but also in meetings and across teams/organisations.
3. **Everyone playing their part in learning.** People involved in MiH in many capacities were part of learning conversations. Though, our final report concludes with a message that the learning from MiH across East Sussex should be "held, owned and furthered not only by community organisations like Hospitable Environment and Compass Arts (as is already happening) but by leaders across the system who can nurture and build upon the learning generated by community organisations and groups – in a complementary rather than paternalistic manner". To do so meaningfully, leaders need to credit, respect and provide ongoing support for the efforts of the people who have generated the learning.