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Ghosts at the feast? The role of research centres in supporting innovative practice in local authorities¹

Elaine Hall² & Jill Clark
Newcastle University UK

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the tensions of evaluation for project workers, managers and researchers. In the UK, a great deal of the innovative practice dedicated to improving the life chances of children and their families is developed by Local Authorities under the umbrella of project funding which includes an independent evaluation: apparently an ideal opportunity for researchers and practitioners to work collaboratively but, in our experience, there are key structural problems. We explore why it is that researchers fail to give formative feedback to local authorities and why they can feel that they are unwanted guests – ‘ghosts at the feast’.

Part 1: The (tense) relationship between service delivery, innovation and evaluation at Local Authority level

Local Authorities (LAs) are hemmed in by confusing and at times contradictory messages about how to meet the specific needs of the people in their areas. Stronger and stronger managerial and reporting structures (Boyne, 2002; Freer, 2002) and pervading notions of ‘best value’ (Ball, *et al.*, 2002) make it clear that LAs must identify the most effective and efficient means of providing services – often by following templates offered by ‘beacon’ (flagship) councils (Dyson, *et al.*, 2000), yet they are also exhorted to innovate and respond to the context and needs of their particular area. The pressure to be always innovating and learning – a ‘coasting’ authority should in fact be ‘striving’ (Freer, 2002) – may put pressure on existing resources. Creating ‘working spaces’ for innovation is a difficult task and LAs have, in the past, tended to rely heavily on short-term project funding, often stitching together funding from a range of initiatives – New Deal for Communities, Education Action Zones, Area Regeneration Grants – in order to support their priorities. This pragmatic use of funding reflects both the ingenuity of local government workers and the extent to which national policy agendas tend to overlap, so that it becomes feasible to represent a single project increasing the communication skills of nursery and reception children in a socially deprived area as fulfilling the objectives of all of

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² **Contact**

Elaine Hall
The Research Centre for Learning and Teaching,
School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences,
Joseph Cowen House, St. Thomas Street,
Newcastle University
Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 7RU.
UK
Elaine.Hall@ncl.ac.uk

the previously cited programmes and thereby ensure the project's longevity. However, there are some significant underlying implications for any evaluation: in many cases, the local authority uses 'new money' to extend or improve 'old' services, so the link between investment and impact is blurred, indeed the authority has already decided that the project has worth and the role of the evaluators is not to test but to confirm this.

Under Sure Start (see <http://www.surestart.gov.uk/aboutsurestart/>), where funding is not so pressing a concern, a different tension has emerged which is linked to the shortage of qualified staff in the early years, across health, social care and education, whereby mainstream staff have moved in to Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs), attracted by higher salaries, promotion potential and more interesting work, leaving existing services short-staffed. The feeling that Local Programmes have 'poached' the best people, while not entirely justified, is certainly a factor in the difficulties experienced by staff in taking innovative practice back to their colleagues in mainstream (Tunstill, *et al.*, 2005; Hall and Clark, 2005).

Evaluation is a required element in most funding packages, it is a part of the management culture and in 'public speech' most local authorities welcome it but there appear to be several structural problems which limit the effectiveness of the evaluation process in improving and spreading innovative practice. These include the quality of information management (Jones and Hughes, 2001); the nature of decision making about innovative practice; the extent to which structural problems in society can be 'solved' at local level (Alcock and Craig, 1998) and the limits to measuring the impact of individual programmes (Gustafsson and Driver, 2005; Boot and Macdonald, 2006). There are also wider questions about the extent to which innovative practice can be seen to fail within a culture dominated by ideas of 'best value'. Experimentation requires the possibility of failure, a failure that can hopefully be analysed to provide better questions and approaches. Often, however, failure or underperformance cannot be easily attributed or explained and for individuals and groups within organisations it is extremely difficult to present reports which effectively say "We had a chunk of your money for a year and we don't think it has had an impact" or simply "We can't tell". This is one of the reasons why it is relatively easy to find data on the implementation of local programmes and relatively difficult to unearth data on outcomes.

Part 2: Sure Start

Sure Start is a Government funded programme in England which was put in place to join up services for families with young children under 5 years old living in poverty and suffering the consequences of social exclusion. Latest figures indicate an investment of £760 million in the period 1999-2004 (Moss, 2004), with further funding of £4,317 million projected 2005-8 (Hodge, 2004). This ambitious and complex project has several important features: as a multidisciplinary intervention programme, it is targeted at individual health, learning and social-emotional development and also aims to strengthen families and communities; as an agent for change in local service delivery it is charged with pioneering and then mainstreaming innovative ways of joining up services and working more sensitively and democratically with families and finally, Sure Start was intended to exemplify the relationship between research, evidence and practice (Eisenstadt, 2000; 2002).

This last element is particularly relevant, since Sure Start appeared to grasp the nettle of evaluation work, exploring not just the 'what' of implementation and outcome but also the 'how and why' of local context. To this end a national evaluation was set

up to monitor the implementation and outcomes of all of the 524 local programmes and to collate and analyse the local evaluations that each SSLP had to commission. While the parameters of data collection for the national evaluation were set, the form and content of local evaluations has evolved differently in local programmes (Allen and Black, 2006), providing an opportunity for SSLPs to decide on their own evaluative priorities but also presenting some problems of cross-programme comparison.

There are several levels at which we can evaluate these evaluations: the evidence of successful implementation of Sure Start Local Programmes, the evidence of the impact on outcomes for young children and their families and the evidence of the 'mainstreaming' of innovative practice from SSLPs into other services.

Implementation

The National Sure Start Evaluation team (<http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/>) have produced a series of synthesis reports on the implementation of the local programmes which conclude that while there has been considerable variation between the circumstances inherited by individual programmes, the key determining factors for successful implementation have been the role of the manager and the ability to build and maintain partnerships with other agencies and to engage with families at the level which was appropriate to their needs (Tunstill, *et al.*, 2005).

Impact on outcomes for children and families

There is a considerable – and given the frameworks of accountability, surprising – consensus that many of the impacts of Sure Start may well not be measurable for ten years (Jowell, 2003, quoted in Tunstill, *et al.*, 2005). It is worth bearing in mind, however, that the range of impacts to be measured is very wide and that the criteria for success is not always clear. For example, in the area of maternal and child health one key aim is smoking cessation and increased breastfeeding, both excellent things. The ways in which smoking is monitored by midwives in early pregnancy assessments is fairly standard, so that areas can be compared in terms of 'smoking mother rates' – however, some SSLPs then collect data on all post-natal households about smoking rates, whereas others monitor the success of cessation programmes – this success can be broken down into take-up of the programme and/or levels of decrease during the programme and, much more rarely, cessation at follow-up (Health visitor, personal communication). These are information systems problems (Jones and Hughes, 2001) and they are pervasive: for breastfeeding, many local health authorities are in the process of re-designing their record-keeping, so it is hard to distinguish between data collected on 'intention to breastfeed' and 'successful breastfeeding' (Hall and Clark, 2005).

However, two recent studies suggest that the positive benefits of Sure Start which might be expected from a successful implementation may not be as unproblematic as hoped. A large scale study suggests that the impact on deprived families is not universal, specifically, that "*SSLPs seem to benefit relatively less socially deprived parents (who have greater personal resources) and their children but seem to have an adverse effect on the most disadvantaged children*" (Belsky *et al.*, 2006, 1476) while another study of personal and cognitive outcomes (Schneider *et al.*, 2006) found that there were no discernable impacts on educational outcomes and only tentative links to be made between Sure Start and better non-academic outcomes. The idea that Sure Start might have a 'Sesame Street' effect, whereby programmes of general benefit have the unintended effect of increasing inequalities is growing,

amidst reports of 'Sure Start tourism' where families from outside the area take advantage of new groups and facilities.

Evidence of 'mainstreaming'

If there is little evidence of impact from existing programmes, it is not surprising to find that there is almost no evidence of mainstreaming happening. In the academic literature there are some examples of dissemination of successful projects (for example, Brown and Liddle, 2005; Bagley *et al.*, 2004; Urwin, 2003; Morris and Leavey, 2006) which may signal attempts to 'spread the word', though what we know of professional cultures of learning suggest that grassroots networks would have greater impact. An unscientific hand search of recent professional journals in health, education and social care suggests that Sure Start practice is widely reported in these media, though more prominently in midwifery and health visiting than in teaching publications.

At present, therefore, it is not possible to say from the evidence presented that Sure Start 'works', though we can say that it has reportedly been implemented more or less according to plan. The complexity of the programmes, their many targets, the difficulties of measurement and information management are all key issues which add to the complexity, leading some commentators to suggest that it is the very complexity of Sure Start that will doom it to failure (Ormerod, 2005). However, this may be an unnecessarily hopeless view: Graham Vimpani writes that *"breaking down this complexity into a series of interconnected pathways between causal factors and their effects, and promoting an understanding of the mediators, potentiators and inhibitors of these outcomes is a challenge that faces all commentators"* (Vimpani, 2002: 285). This brings us back to our role in this process.

Part 3: What are we doing here?

The authors of this paper have been working in social science research for a combined thirty years, primarily in educational research focused on issues of inclusion, social justice, family learning, the exploration of professional roles and multi-professional working. We have a profound interest in, and a commitment to, the innovative work carried out in the local authorities in our region: where professionals from a range of education, health and social care backgrounds constantly break new ground in finding ways to work with young children and their families, to provide services, opportunities and spaces where needs can be more precisely identified and met. In just the last ten years we have been involved in more than a dozen evaluations of projects and initiatives undertaken by local authorities. The lessons we have learned about the kinds of work that has been done with families, the strengths and pitfalls, are many and complex but they are, on the whole, not 'out there' influencing policy and practice, provoking thought, debate and new ideas. Many of our insights are not even reflected in the evaluation reports. Most of these evaluation reports remain unpublished and few, if any, of our findings have made their way in to the professional journals. This is not a pattern reflected in our other research work, funded by charities and research councils, where reports are published, available on the internet and where the dissemination of findings through conferences and journal articles is an integral part of the work. There is even some evidence that local and national government and professional bodies have made constructive use of our work. Why has our work on local evaluations been different?

University research has many facets: there are high-status projects, funded by research councils and government departments which take almost as much time and energy to bid for as to complete, commissioned work from partner organisations,

charities and other funders where shared agendas can be generated or significant compromises brokered and there are smaller projects, which may add to our understanding of the field and our research expertise but which are also pragmatically undertaken to keep researchers in their jobs between the (hopefully) larger projects. As a University- recognised research centre (<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/ecls/research/education/cflat.htm>) we have a role in the region, bridging and supporting knowledge creation and translation: contributing to the 'mediating chains' (Higgins, *et al.*, 2005: 35) that radiate beyond the individual university to the local economy and geographical context and encompass the relationships between academia, government and commerce, often expressed in concepts such as 'Mode 2 knowledge production' and the 'entrepreneurial university' (Benneworth, *et al.*, 2006; forthcoming). We have a track record of collaborative work in the region, developing projects with local authority partners which have had significant impacts on local practice and training for professionals (see, for example Mroz *et al.*, 2002). In trying to understand why local evaluations are so unsatisfactory for us as a research centre, and we strongly suspect, for our local authority partners, it is worth while trying to contrast a successful 'local' project with a less successful one. Our success criteria are: collection of data as planned, production of a project report on time, collaboration with research partners as evidenced by mutual changes and learning, impact on policy and practice at a local level and the dissemination of findings nationally and internationally. It seems fair to point out that it does seem to be harder to publish from certain types of work: a comparison of peer-reviewed journal articles from the ESRC- funded Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) and Sure Start, with the TLRP producing four times as many journal articles in the period 2001-2006.

In case you think – as well you might – that we have cherry-picked the best and worst for comparison here, we can assure our readers that there have been both better and worse projects than these and that these two were chosen because of their similarity in theme and per year cost seemed to make this a fair comparison.

Case 1: the successful project

This project, in the important area of early communication development, professional training and support was funded by the Nuffield Foundation, took one year to complete the active fieldwork and to present the project report and cost £16,671. The project was managed by an Advisory Board drawn from the regional authorities who acted as research partners as well as fellow academics. The Advisory Board had considerable influence in the direction and emphasis of the project. The research generated a large dataset about professional understanding of communication development in the North East of England, which immediately stimulated changes in the approaches to training and opportunities offered within local authorities, including the development of an innovative toolkit by one authority. The questionnaire and interview analysis provided a map of initial training that prompted the development of a Diploma programme for professionals in the early years who were interested in communication. Our analysis of the ways in which various professionals work with one another - or fail to do so (Hall, 2005) has been used to re-shape initial training at Newcastle University, so that multi-professional awareness and relationships are built in to professional identity from the beginning. The overall findings of the research about the levels of expertise held by early years professionals were taken to the Health Visitors' annual conference to contribute to the debate on how services for families and children can and should be 'joined up' and reformed (Pearson and Hall, 2004). The project has been disseminated in a range of international journals for education and speech professionals (Mroz and Hall 2003; Hall and Letts, 2003; Mroz, 2006a; 2006b).

Case 2: the less successful project

This project, an evaluation of a local Sure Start programme, was designed as a formative collaboration between the local authority and the University, whereby the key shared areas of interest: family learning, early communication development, multi-professional working – amongst others; would be explored through a series of linked case studies which would both improve practice on the ground, improve understanding of Sure Start as a project and create new perspectives on innovative work with the most marginalised families. It was funded by the local authority, designed to take place over three years and the initially agreed cost was £39,000. The professional researchers reading this will have taken the clues from the preceding sentence: the project, due to start in June 2002 actually started in February 2003, only to be suspended when the Manager departed from the Programme and then revived in December 2003 when a replacement was appointed. At that time a 'Baseline' survey of local opinion and awareness of the local programme was completed. The data management systems which would have enabled a monitoring strand within the evaluation had still not been installed by the time of our final meeting in March 2006. There were two levels of reporting and collaboration within the project: one with the SSLP team and their Executive Board, which included local councillors and parents from the areas and another which was the strategic management level within the local authority. Regular meetings were held with the programme management and the Executive Board at which case study topics were advanced by management and accepted by the research team. Two observational case studies of projects within Sure Start focussing on children's creative and language development and an analytic case study of multi-professional working were completed in 2004-5 and a further case study of a support programme for children with language difficulties and of working with 'hard to reach' families were planned. Both of these case studies were subsequently cancelled by the programme management and a draft final report was submitted. At this stage the overt involvement of the strategic managers came to the fore and a period of negotiation over the content and presentation of the final report began, which was finally concluded in March 2006. The main concern for the strategic level managers was the formative nature of the case studies, which raised problems and areas for development as well as highlighting good practice. From their perspective, Sure Start had to be presented as an example of good local management and a springboard to their ambitious development of Children's Centres across the borough and from our perspective, leaving out any comments that were not wholly positive amounted to an unethical use of research evidence. In particular, they were unhappy with our report on multi-professional working, in particular the view of the Sure Start professionals that their main barriers were linked to structural and management issues in the authority. This is a major tension in project evaluation: a main objective of the initiative has not been fulfilled, or has been only partially achieved, because of factors beyond the scope and remit of that project. The evaluators must report this, normally in local evaluations, to the managers who have within their remit the theoretical power to address these factors – though it must be allowed, rarely the actual money, time or other resources to do so.

The extent to which we reached a mutually acceptable compromise was reached can be judged by the circumstances that the report has been accepted but not published and we are not naming the authority in this paper. Our relationships with members of the SSLP remained positive and informative on both sides, evidenced by a series of away-days where understandings from fieldwork were explored collaboratively and new explanations sought. One of the key emerging threads from this work were the tensions that the professionals in the SSLP felt between the external expectations of Sure Start which they were unable even to engage with because of systems failures

and the complications of local territories and their genuine excitement in and commitment to the innovative work done in collaboration with one another and with the local community, sadly this work is in the report, somewhere in a filing cabinet in a darkened basement behind a door with a sign on it saying beware of the leopard (with apologies to the shade of Douglas Adams). It is fair to say that nobody is terribly pleased with this one.

Figure 1: Summary table of key differences between the successful and unsuccessful case study

Communication project	Sure Start evaluation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On time, on budget • Collaborative learning • Influence on local policy • Influence on practice • Range of dissemination audiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delayed, over budget • Limited collaboration • No influence on local policy • Limited influence on practice • Minimal dissemination

Can this be explained simply in terms of no-one really being in control of the situation? Each group had a degree of autonomy, some of which was negotiated, some of which was 'under the radar' but there was no clear structure of responsibility and reporting: both the researchers and the SSLP reported feeling confused as to whether we were ultimately working for Sure Start, the Local Authority or the community served by the programme and this lack of clarity about accountability is reflected in other evaluations of SSLPs (Allen and Black, 2006). For the strategic managers in the local authority, the complexity of implementation and the focus on outcomes assessment were of paramount concern, so that the project design – focussed as it was on process – had little to offer them: *"a distraction from the main event"* (Allen and Black, 2006: 242). For our partners in the SSLP, the external parameters, delays and imposed agendas were familiar elements from previous project work, though there was a sense that within Sure Start the levels of surveillance and the stakes in general were higher. The researchers' role in raising the stakes should not be ignored – we see ourselves as partners, as 'critical friends' but at the beginning of any evaluation we must be more aware that our presence is threatening, alien, accepted as a necessary evil but fundamentally unwanted. Time is the most important factor here: it takes time to build relationships – within projects, with target client groups and between evaluators and project workers. This 'high stakes' atmosphere worked against iterative development of projects and working relationships and overall, our mutual feeling was that while some changes in practice had taken place, the collaborative learning was not sustained over a long enough period to really embed in practice. For us as academics there are several considerations – the lack of control could lead to our valuing this project more lightly than others: the parameters of the project were set up long ago – however much the area interests us, we would have set it up differently if we had been designing a research project from scratch – and our appearance on the scene is too late to do much more than a post-hoc reflection. Formative though it was in intention, any project where the parameters of success are not mutually agreed before it starts risks being merely summative. However, there is a further issue: it should be possible for us to weave together the learning from this sort of work – not just in 'process story' papers like this one – but to find a way to bring the innovative project work out of the filing cabinets and explore the connections between them.

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Elaine Hall and Jill Clark are Senior Research Associates in the Research Centre for Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University. Elaine has a particular research interest in family learning and Jill in participatory research with children and young people. They have conducted many local evaluations over the past ten years.