

Directors' Forum, 2010

Directors get the nudge: don't try to control it, change it!

Only to be expected, surely, that a Directors Forum worthy of the name, sitting down on the edge of England to consider 'creative responses' to a spending crisis, will stimulate as many questions as it answers.

For example: is the demand for drastic public spending cuts being driven more by the new political agenda than by any objective economic necessity? Paul Ormerodⁱ would say so.

Either way, might these new tough times be providing Directors of Children's Services with an opportunity to be rid of interventions that don't work and to refashion the system? Stephen Scottⁱⁱ and Martin Knappⁱⁱⁱ think they might.

Does the success of evidence-based programmes confirm the value of prevention science and also demonstrate the need for fidelity to the service model, and for meticulous evaluation to ensure that more can be done with less? Let's hope so.

Or might the critics of evidence-informed practice have a point? Is the preoccupation with 'efficiencies' symptomatic of a society more interested in social control than in motivating communities toward change? Charles Leadbeater^{iv} would worry about that gloomier possibility.

Oh, and one last thing, when two Bristol students^v explain – with palpable excitement – how, without any training at all, they have been spending part of the city's youth service budget on programs that 'feel right' - evaluated and faithfully implemented or not - should directors of services wring their hands? Or should they applaud the fact that local authorities are embracing the experimental ideas behind Total Place and other collaborative partnerships, in their eagerness to reshape the system?

Applause seemed to be the more constructive approach. The formal and the spontaneous must combine; otherwise there could be no evolutionary 'network nudge' on the ground, and no paradigm shift at the top.

Ideas man and former Blair policy advisor Charles Leadbeater rounded off the **research in practice** annual Directors' Forum, last Wednesday afternoon, with an appropriately past-the-post keynote presentation about learning from the extremes.

At the heart of it was the argument that transformative innovation is generated in the margins and very seldom by society's 'incumbents' who, much as they might wish it otherwise, must spend their working lives assessing and managing risk.

That was the most uncomfortable of the messages Forum incumbents were encouraged to take away from the frying pan of two days open discussion to the fires back home.

How were they to square Charles Leadbeater's view with Stephen Scott's sober reflections the previous afternoon on the time and money being wasted on interventions and programs that did vulnerable children no good and, in some cases, more harm?

At the end of Charles Leadbeater's survey of mavericks and survivors to be found in the favelas of the global South^{vi} **research in practice** Partnership Board chair Andrew Webb^{vii} went to the crux of the paradox.

Along the way, the former had stressed the importance of disruptive informal agencies to any genuinely radical innovation process, and had represented them as adjacent but philosophically in opposition to the formal processes of 'improvement' dutifully sustained by Directors of Children's Services.

'So we can't do anything. What can we do?' Andrew Webb pleaded.

Much as he and his staff might be attracted to the life of the hackers and renegades who ruled the informal and disruptive creative sector, how could they abandon the home ground of their own profession? And were they ever to cross the border, surely the haphazard vitality of the world they arrived in would be contaminated and destroyed.

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What could they do?

The combination of influences was the thing to capture, Charles Leadbeater reassured him. System change relied on the scientific and the expert as much as it did on informal networks and disruptive thinking. The trouble was they were not getting equivalent attention: debt crisis or no debt crisis, risk management and damage limitation drove too much in policy making.

In truth, Charles Leadbeater's account of the inspiration to be found in the slums of Delhi and Lagos was anticipated by a series of morning panellists in their descriptions of the new dynamics inside the English service system.

Lesley Cramman^{viii} and Dave Hill^{ix} traced the progress of the Total Place initiative and spoke of the profound impact of systems thinking. Dave Hill's case was Croydon, where he said the old public services paradigm of throwing money at a social problem and then implementing command and control strategies was at the end of its life.

The new model - perforce doing more with less - trusted that well-formulated proposals for radical redesign would emerge out of a cross-disciplinary collaboration. An expert group prepared the ground in workshops and then gathered insight and support from the widest community of opinion they could assemble.

It had been discovered during those exchanges, he said, that Croydon's 26 children's centres were not making contact with the most vulnerable families, and that vital support services were not reaching enough children in the crucial first three years of their lives.

For most families, their own kin and friends were the first port of call in times of trouble, but the most disadvantaged populations - asylum seeking families, for example - lacked such social networks altogether.

Among other ethnographic discoveries: the second child in a vulnerable relationship too often precipitated a crisis, and the after-burn of a bad experience of care services lingered for a very long time. Housing and accommodation problems - usually beyond

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the reach of children and family services – swamped all else.

Shared insights had resulted in a determination to redefine the role of midwives and health visitors, to invest in family partnership teams and to strip out what was not working. There was already a measurable return: Croydon was estimating savings of £8.4m by 2014 and £25m by 2017 accruing to the police and the health services as well as to social care providers.

But here was a problem yet to be solved: the savings from successful interventions accrued to many agencies, but multi-agency investment in prevention programmes was difficult to engineer.

Just as Charles Leadbeater would speak later of the value of disruption as a precursor to innovation, Lesley Cramman identified disturbance as a vital component of the 'living systems theory' Total Place embodies.

It might be a trick played with the light to portray the 'pick and slash' of spending cuts as benign disturbance, but it could work in favour of communities on the verge of working together by motivating them to forge a new collaborative identity.

Charles Leadbeater's version of the same argument went, 'for there to be change on a community- or a system-wide scale policy makers need to pull, not to push. You have to make motivation central to the experience'.

The news from 'early intervention' city

In the two years before the General Election, as the prospect of spending cuts became more real, a cross-party alliance between Nottingham North MP Graham Allen and former Conservative party leader Iain Duncan Smith in the cause of early intervention began to figure in the landscape of top-down welfare politics.

Graham Allen set out his reading of the cost benefit argument in 2008 when he declared Nottingham to be the UK's first 'early intervention' city. In between presentations about Total Place and the UK Resilience programme Nottingham's Corporate Director for Children and Families, Ian Curryer^x, described what it had been like to steer the city-

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wide experiment.

To have £4.5m to invest from the Local Strategic Partnership which Graham Allen chaired had been a 'fantastic opportunity'. Nottingham had launched 16 projects – on reflection, perhaps a few too many. The city was part of the UK pilot of Family Nurse Partnerships and had got to grips with the US list of proven programmes. It had developed new approaches of its own, in particular a life skills curriculum for 11-16-year olds, and made a big investment in the SEAL curriculum.

Evidence was being collected on what might not be working, so that some low grade interventions vaguely targeting substance abuse, for example, had already been decommissioned. A Nottingham University postgraduate researcher had been assigned to every project, and for insight at street level into city deprivation and the progress of targeted groups, the city had made innovative use of Experian's Mosaic UK database.

The move towards neighbourhood-based prevention services was a change his workforce had wanted, he said, and the benefit of locally-driven projects was already clear. But, were he to re-launch the initiative with the benefit of two years hindsight, he would not want to start without evidence-based programmes, or without being able to take account of the improving understanding of programme fidelity and dosage.

More closely spaced milestones would deal better with the paradoxical demand for immediate evidence of long-term impact, and also allow him to decommission failing or underused services more quickly. And he noted the paradox of not subjecting internal services to the same scrutiny as those Nottingham or any other authority commissioned.

A reduction in the number of prolific offenders seemed to confirm the value of life skills training for early adolescents, but outcomes measurement needed to be more scientific, and, notwithstanding the ethical issues, randomized group trials would be necessary if SEAL was to be properly tested.

The UK Resilience Programme developed in Hertfordshire and described by Lindsay Edwards^{xi} is more evidence of how far US-designed interventions are becoming part of the UK service landscape.

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In Hertfordshire's case, the source material is a form of cognitive behavioural therapy developed at the University of Pennsylvania and derived from the work of the anti-Freudian, Albert Ellis, who once told The New York Times, 'The trouble with most therapy is that it helps you to *feel* better. But you don't *get* better. You have to back it up with action, action, action.'

Lindsay Edwards explained that the 18 hour-long Penn Resiliency model sessions were designed to help young people think accurately about any predicament they encountered. It enabled them to 'bounce back from catastrophe' and to negotiate with their families.

Staff who had been to Pennsylvania for training were using the skills they had developed in their own lives. The benefits had percolated the workforce to the point that people were prepared to champion the programme and the evidence-informed practice it represented. The coping strategies it taught had the potential to transform children's services.

Evaluation of the UK formulation by researchers at the London School of Economics suggested that resilience training was having an impact on levels of depression and anxiety, especially among girls and in work with mixed groups with special needs.

Put all four morning examples together, session chair Carol Tozer said, and the picture was one of a gradual paradigm shift. Good science in the foundations was combining with increasing confidence in the value of community-based innovation and workforce development – all leading to long-term costs benefits

"We know what good parenting is"

As Director of Research at the National Academy of Parenting Practitioners, Stephen Scott's brief includes undertaking clinical trials to evaluate the effectiveness of promising approaches, publishing a database of the best and advising Government on good choices.

Where parenting is concerned, the research argument from the Academy is on these

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confident lines. Long-term child development studies in New Zealand and elsewhere have shown that the consequences of allowing conduct disorder to take root in seven-year-olds are devastating for the individual, his or her family and society as a whole.

The financial implications are enormous. The lifetime cost of responding to the needs of a single high-risk young person is around £1.3m; individuals diagnosed with a conduct disorder at the age of ten cost society ten times as much by the time they are 28 as those without.

That little of cluster of statistics encapsulates the argument in favour of early intervention parenting strategies and the politically fashionable interest in cost benefit analysis. It provides a foundation on which early intervention initiatives like Nottingham's can be built.

As much to the point, certain parenting programs were known to be effective and were readily available, Stephen Scott explained. They had been shown to work even to the extent of triggering a measurable effect on the cortisol balance – the brain chemistry – of the young people who received them.

“We know what good parenting is,” he said. The priority for local authorities must be to scale them up beyond their present ‘boutique’ level. Strategies for doing that had yet to be formulated.

As things stood, even though the money was running out, local authorities were too likely to invest in interventions that didn't work. Parents might like them and recommend them to a friend. They might improve a mother's sense of satisfaction and her attitude towards parenting. But too often there would be no improvement in actual day-to-day parenting or child outcomes.

Multi-faceted approaches such as the Supporting Parents on Kids Education in Schools (SPOKES) programme addressed multiple risk factors by screening the school population in order to identify children at risk, and then to address incipient behavioural and learning problems simultaneously.

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His advice to local authorities who were ready to use evidence-based programmes to address multiple problems was to spread the investment in order to target specific difficulties. A portfolio of proven programs would pay increasingly predictable long-term dividends.

“Don’t waste programmes on people who don’t need them; just make sure that the people who need them turn up,” he said.

A recession makes a U-turn

Among the heroes of Charles Leadbeater’s exploration of innovation on the margins was Rodrigo Baggio, a child of the favelas of Rio de Janeiro who exchanged a stultifying education for a short career as teenage drug baron earning \$20,000 a week before escaping the accompanying danger of early death to set up a technology consulting company. Soon afterwards he became the founder of Rio’s first citizens rights and technology school. Find Rodrigo on the internet^{xii} and you will find a man as ‘incumbent’ as former president of the World Bank James Wolfensohn congratulating him on the significance of his achievement.

To account for some of the deeper mysteries at the heart of global economics and their effect on local systems from Birmingham to Brazil, the Forum brought Paul Ormerod to Dartington.

He was the one who suggested that perceptions about the present debt crisis were constructed as much on the new UK coalition’s agenda as objective economics. The debt was enormous, he conceded; all the same it had not reached the tipping point of true meltdown and it was nothing like as severe as it had been during the 1950s when it was accepted as part of the ordinary aftermath of world war.

The banking disasters of 2008 had been truly cataclysmic, even so. On September 15th industrial capitalism had been close to collapse. Had not the urgency of the need for state intervention in the US been recognised by one whose academic specialism had been the lessons of the Great Depression, true global catastrophe might not have been averted.

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As it was, the role of the state in such a crisis had been reaffirmed. Lehman Brothers had been sacrificed to demonstrate the safer interventionist principle.

On the other hand, Paul Ormerod argued, the massive increase in UK public expenditure of the last decade had not led to any equivalent social improvement. The return had been too small; devolving power and slashing public expenditure was as much a response to those self-evident system failures as to the global alarm.

He began with a taxonomy of recession. There had been 224 examples in the West since the late 19th century. Most had been short; long recessions were rare. The latest had been as severe as any of the worst 25% since the late 1800s. Once recovery started, it tended to be fast – V shaped on a graph. After an accompanying financial crisis, it was more usually U-shaped. The UK was just escaping the bottom curve of that U.

As to the lessons, his conclusions were rather similar to Charles Leadbeater's and to those of Croydon Total Place protagonist Dave Hill. Economic and social systems should henceforth be considered from an evolutionary perspective, rather than in terms of the centrally planned mechanical approaches typical of the 20th century, when checklists of policies were drawn up and ticked in turn.

The dynamics of the alternative Ormerod 'nudge and networks' theory are based on a view of human behaviour that echoes the thinking behind social marketing and public health strategies. Individuals might respond erratically and irrationally to 'nudge' signals from government about wearing seatbelts or eating more healthily, he said, but their social networks were more predictable. People liked to do what other people liked to do.

Were one to rely purely on nudge factors such as putting up the price of tobacco or accentuating a health warning to achieve a big reduction in smoking, the intervention needed to be universally and evenly experienced. Rely on a network effect and only a small number of people would need to be 'nudged' to trigger highly significant change.

Nudging apart, Paul Ormerod argued that diversity was an important strategy for obtaining the best results – just as it was in nature. The public sector must accept that

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failure was a natural component of successful local experimentation, and that decommissioning failure was an integral aspect of success.

Beware Luddites and snake-oil salesmen

Discussion of cost benefit analysis on the first day focused on the work of Stephen Scott's research colleague and a pioneer of the science in the UK, Martin Knapp. He explained that it remained largely an area of US expertise because in that country holistic services for children and young people and their parents and families were unknown. The impact of largely self-contained programmes was more easily measured. Conversely, the US was very bad at measuring the impact of a range of services.

In the pursuit of economy, efficiency and effectiveness, evangelical cost analysts were frequently in danger of neglecting equity, he said. Forum members should also beware small research samples used as a basis for their (stupid) generalisations. They should beware Roman Emperor syndrome, whose victims were prone to go along with one set of findings simply for want of any comparison. Luddites and snake oil salesmen were also on his list, as were obsessive scientists, who neglected the reality that to be of lasting value, their science must be pragmatic, proportional and generalisable.

The background to Kate Mulley's^{xiii} presentation on Social Return on Investment was a report published last year by the New Economics Foundation with her charity Action for Children.

The verdict of *Backing the Future* was that the UK could save upwards of £510 billion over 20 years and make huge improvements in social well-being by shifting investment in children and young people to a more preventative model.

Drawing on cost benefit analyses by Washington State Institute for Public Policy economist Steve Aos and others, the NEF team's projections included the potential impact of evidence-based initiatives such as Multisystemic Therapy, Life Skills Training, Triple P and Nurse Family Partnership contained in Stephen Scott's recommended portfolio.

Social Return on Investment, Kate Mulley explained, had the potential to measure effectiveness using subtler indicators than cash benefit to service providers. By means of impact mapping, it could acknowledge the value of an intervention to the targeted child's siblings and parents, for example. The analytical model distinguished between cost benefit to local authorities and the state, and long-term benefit to the quality of life of the individual.

SROI projections suggested that if the Government were to invest in targeted interventions, universal childcare and paid parental leave, a saving of £880 billion would be made over 20 years compared with the £4 trillion cost of business as usual. For every £1 invested annually in Action for Children's targeted services designed to catch problems early, society would benefit by between £7.60 and £9.20.

The day's optimistic discussions were summed up by Oxfordshire's Director for Children, Young People and Families Meera Spillett^{xiv}. Children's services were typified by a 'simple complexity', she said – the simplicity of what society wanted for its children made complicated by the ramifications of government and governance. "Our task as leaders is to keep it simple."

That meant learning from what didn't work, acknowledging the importance of programme fidelity, and remembering how, down the generations, the political response to bad cases, was too often to draft bad laws in conditions of 'moral panic'.

To trust the preventative model, policy makers had to give their commitment to processes that did not adhere to any recognised political timescale.

"To work together, people will have to abandon the life rafts they've been clinging to," she said. Charles Leadbeater's conclusion echoed hers. "So... do you want control or do you want change?"

Kevin Mount, **research in practice** Associate

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- ⁱ Paul Ormerod, Economist and writer and Director of Volterra Consulting
- ⁱⁱ Professor Stephen Scott, Professor of Child Health and Behaviour, Kings College, London, and Director of Research and Development, National Academy for Parenting Practitioners.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Professor Martin Knapp, Professor of Social Policy, Director of the Personal Social Services Research Unit, and Director of the National Institute for Health Research School for Social Care Research at the London School of Economics and Political Science.
- ^{iv} Charles Leadbeater, Independent Writer, Demos Research Associate and Consultant
- ^v George Haynes and Madeline Bracken Patterson, Bristol Youth Parliament
- ^{vi} <http://www.cisco.com/web/about/citizenship/socio-economic/globalEd.html>
- ^{vii} Andrew Webb, Corporate Director Children and Young People's Directorate, Stockport, and Chair **research in practice** Partnership Board
- ^{viii} Lesley Cramman, Consultant, WiT Partnership and key member of Total Place Programmes
- ^{ix} Dave Hill, Executive Director for Children, Young People and Learners, Croydon
- ^x Ian Curryer, Corporate Director of Children's Services, Nottingham City
- ^{xi} Lindsay Edwards, Head of Young People's Substance Misuse, Crime Reduction and Emotional Wellbeing Services, Hertfordshire
- ^{xii} <http://www.internationalpeaceandconflict.org/video/rodrigo-baggio-an-uncommon>
- ^{xiii} Kate Mulley, Head of Policy and Research, Action for Children
- ^{xiv} Meera Spillett, Director for Children, Young People and Families, Oxfordshire