Meaningful Measurement Inquiry – what have we learned?

Summary

Too often, measurement is reduced to an irritating afterthought conducted mainly to report to funders based on data extracted from a project. It encourages overclaiming and does not help us learn. Measures introduced by funders and commissioners shape the priorities and therefore the organisational culture. If the measures are not human friendly, then the service won't be either.

We have been experimenting with different ways to measure impact. We've learned that trying to measure meaningfully changes how we think about work, helps to shift power, improves relationships, centres learning and is enjoyable.

We've learned that if we want to measure in more meaningful ways, we need to:

> 1. Stop perverse incentives encouraging people to work to targets rather than engage in meaningful work.
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> 2. Make learning central to the work, rather than an afterthought.
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> 3. Stop punishing 'failure'.
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> 4. Centre the experiences of those involved instead of the convenience of the funder.
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> 5. Embrace complexity – life is messy, and impact doesn't always fit in a box.

How do we make this happen?

- Review forms – remove unnecessary questions.
- Revisit targets – use KPIs to motivate and improve work rather than control.
- Encourage dialogue – have more open conversations about measurement.
- Embed learning – make learning the work, and focus on what we actually want to learn.
- Secure resources – build measurement costs into funding and budgets.
- Try a pilot – try doing something new in one aspect of your work.
- Push back – resist demands for arbitrary measurement and suggest alternatives. Don't pass on the problem.
- Join forces – learn with others and use your collective experiences to influence change.

The meaningful measurement inquiry has shown that there is collective momentum from individuals and partners across the city motivated to make this change happen. We invite you to join us – discuss this learning with your team, experiment with new ways of doing things, share with us what you learn.

Introduction

Our preoccupation with measurement

The Old Fire Station is a centre for creativity in Oxford which encourages people from all backgrounds to understand and shape the world in which we live through stories, creativity and the arts, and by connecting with others. We produce and present art. We support people to be creative. We include people facing tough times. We work with artists and communities across the city. We're not professional evaluators, and we're not academics. So why have we become so preoccupied with measurement? Like so many others, we find it a struggle. We're frustrated with the gap between genuine learning and how we measure impact. We're tired of feeling pressured to overclaim and enter numbers into forms we don't believe tell us anything of value. Despite this, we know that measurement matters – it influences what we prioritise, how we learn, how we share power and whose voices are heard.

Marmalade

Changing how we measure impact is complex. It can't be done in isolation – it depends on individuals, organisations, funders and commissioners, and wider decision makers working together. Marmalade is a collaboration involving partners from across Oxford who are focused on making the city a better place. The group leads activities that shift and share power and help build more human-centred services for everyone. Marmalade currently includes representatives from the following organisations: Old Fire Station, Oxford Hub, Oxford City Council, African Families in the UK, Active Oxfordshire and Lankelly Chase Foundation.

Two Inquiries are central to the work of Marmalade: Sharing power and Meaningful Measurement.

Meaningful Measurement Inquiry

At Marmalade Festival in April 2022, we launched the Meaningful Measurement Action Inquiry. Over the course of a year, we've worked with partners from across the city to experiment with different approaches to measurement. We've brought partners together – including local authorities, voluntary action and lived experience groups, service providers, funders and commissioners and cultural partners – to reflect on what works (and doesn't) when it comes to measurement, what needs to shift in order for us to measure in more meaningful ways, and how we start to make this happen.

Storytelling Methodology

Storytelling is an evaluation methodology led by the Old Fire Station. Inspired by the Most Significant Change Technique (MSC), it involves collecting stories from people about their experience of a project, and then bringing people together to discuss the stories collected and what we can learn from them. You can read more about how this works in practice here.

Since 2019, **over 70 partners have been trained in using this approach to evaluate impact**, and many more have been involved in telling stories and attending discussion sessions. These include institutions such as Oxford University and the County Council, service providers such as Elmore Community Service and St Mungo's, and community organisations such as African Families in the UK

and Broken Spoke Bike Co-op. Over 120 stories have been collected across a range of projects and areas of focus.

In September 2022, the Old Fire Station convened partners to share what they'd learned from putting Storytelling into practice.

The session was attended by individuals from Aspire Oxford, Broken Spoke BOK Co-op, Connection Support (NRPF project), Elmore Community Services, Lankelly Chase Foundation, Lived Experience Advisory Forum (LEAF), Oxford Biomedical Research Centre, Oxford Cultural Education Partnership (OCEP), Oxford Hub, Oxford City Council, Oxfordshire County Council and the Old Fire Station, all of whom have been involved in putting Storytelling into practice in different ways.

A summary of key learnings can be found here.

Signal

Signal is an online survey which aims to help understand household needs. The tool, which was developed with communities in Paraguay, is an asset-based approach to understanding need within local communities which enables the people being surveyed to have ownership of the data that is collected. The Signal pilot in Oxford set out to test Signal as a motivational tool for families, a way of building peer to peer support, and a methodology to build community mobilisation on jointly identified priorities. This has involved working with 69 families with young children in OX4 in partnership with Flo's, Donnington Doorstep, Viva, The Hub, Hope Café, and Oxfordshire Breastfeeding Support.

In September 2022, we convened parents and local partners to share the findings and reflect on the approach and next steps.

A summary of key learnings can be found here.

Funders and commissioner's event

In November 2022, we brought together funders and commissioners to share their experiences of measurement and discuss: What do funders and commissioners struggle with when it comes to measurement and reporting? What gets in the way of measuring in more meaningful ways? What needs to shift? What examples are there of people doing things differently? What's next? The meeting brought together individuals from Oxfordshire Community Foundation (OCF), Oxford Hub, Oxfordshire County Council, Oxford City Council, Step Change, Lankelly Chase Foundation and the Collective Impact Agency CIC. The session was convened by the Old Fire Station.

A summary of the key learning from this event can be found here.

Learning across an organisation

We have been working with colleagues in departments across Oxford City Council to understand different approaches to measurement and look for ways of helping think about an organisation-wide approach to learning.

We have also been trying to improve our own practice by introducing different ways of learning and reflecting at all levels within the Old Fire Station itself.

Learning

Funders, commissioners, national partners, community groups, local authorities, service providers, academic institutions - a huge breadth of partners and individuals from across Oxford have engaged with discussions and experiments around how we can measure in more meaningful ways. It's brought to light the wealth of people who are deeply frustrated with existing approaches, whilst also reinforcing the momentum there is around this work, and the appetite for change.

Meaningless measurement

Across the Inquiry, there are several resounding challenges and frustrations with conventional measurement:

- It fails to align with our values.
- It can undermine relationships and trust.
- It's often focusses on demonstrating pre-determined outcomes rather than understanding what *actually* happened.
- Time is wasted collecting data which doesn't tell us anything, but grantees are required to collect in order to report to funders.
- There is pressure to overclaim.
- It's orientated around demonstrating success, which means we are less inclined to hear the voices of dissent, and to learn from failure.
- It can be reductive and fail to reflect the complexity of lived experiences.

Meaningful Measurement

Meaningful measurement on the other hand can **helps individuals to:**

- reflect on your experience and what it means for you.
- be heard and influence decisions.
- be part of shaping how work is perceived and represented.
- be part of an enjoyable and rewarding process.

Helps organisations to:

- listen better and build relationships.
- understand what *actually* matters to people and what really happened.
- centre the voice and experiences of those most involved.
- generate data which meaningfully informs decisions around what is prioritised and why.
- reflect the complexity and depth of the work.
- Foster collaboration – making evaluation a shared endeavour across teams and partners.
- Embed learning and reflection within organisational practice and culture.

Helps funders and commissioners to:

- understand grant impact.
- connect with the significance of the work.
- build relationships with grantees based on trust and transparency.
- generate data which meaningfully informs decisions.
- support partners to learn from projects and strengthen their work.

What stops us from measuring meaningfully?

The Inquiry reinforced the following challenges:

- **Time and money** – there is limited capacity and resource for measurement. Carrying out approaches such as Storytelling in meaningful way calls for even more.
- **Obsession with success** – there is a preoccupation with accountability and demonstrating success to decision makers, funders and commissioners.
- **Power dynamics –** the relationship between grantees and funders is complex. Sometimes it's easier for grantees to 'dance the dance' than push back and take issue with reporting requirements. A need for diligence and safeguarding can get in the way of funders trusting that the people on the ground know best. Similar dynamics can underpin funders' relationships with donors or central government, which ultimately shape the reporting expectations for grantees.
- **Standardised reporting –** data often needs to be comparable across projects and funds. This can result in standardized, one-size-fit-all measurement tools.
- **Numbers over stories –** credence can be given to quantifiable data that can easily be distilled and summarized. Meanwhile, person-centred approaches, such as Storytelling, can be dismissed as lacking rigour.
- **Qualitative vs quantitative –** there can be a false dichotomy between qualitative or quantitative measurement, when in fact we need both in order to measure in more meaningful ways.
- **Learning as a luxury –** Organisations can lack protected time and space to focus on learning and it can be hard to prioritize amidst the day to day.
- **No quick fix –** Shifting towards more meaningful measurement is about more than finding new tools, it calls for a wider culture shift. Multiple layers of reporting mean that even if support for more meaningful measurement exists in one part of an organisation it can be difficult for that to reach the highest levels of decision-making.

What do we need to change?

1. Stop perverse incentives. If tools and criteria for measurement incentivise people to meet targets for the sake of it rather than engage in meaningful work, then they are no longer fit for purpose.

2. Make learning central to the work. Rather than an add-on, make learning part of the work.

3. Make it ok to fail. We need to be able to take risks, make mistakes, learn and adapt. In order to do so we need to move away from a preoccupation with success, and organisations need to know now they won't be punished for failing to hit targets.

4. Centre the experiences of those most involved. This means adapting processes away from servicing the convenience of the funder towards the centring the voices and experiences of people at the heart of the work.

5. Embrace complexity. Lives are complex, change isn't always linear, impact doesn't always take place within an annual funding cycle and is often inextricable from the wider eco-system and context it works within.

How do we make this change happen?

- **Review forms** – focus on what you need to know, remove anything non pertinent, and consider forms with grantee and beneficiary needs in mind.
- **Revisit targets** – set targets that motivate and improve work rather than control.
- **Encourage dialogue** –have more open conversations about measurement between funders and grantees, and support people to choose how they learn and evaluate.
- **Embed learning** – grantees, focus on what you actually want to learn, rather than shaping reporting around the needs of funders. Funders, make it easier for grantees to acknowledge and learn from failure and reward people for sharing learning.
- **Secure Resources** –build measurement costs into budgets and proposals.
- **Try a pilot** – you don't need to change everything at once. Focus on experimenting with new ways of doing things in one area e.g. fund grantees to use Storytelling and include the funder in the analysis of stories.
- **Push back** – try and resist demands for arbitrary measurement. Don't pass on the problem. Share your feedback and suggest alternatives.
- **Join forces** – learn with others and use your collective experiences to influence change.

Conclusions and next steps

Experimentation with approaches such as Storytelling and Signal has reinforced the influential role measurement can play – it shapes what we prioritise, how we learn, how we share power and whose voices are at the centre. Moving towards more meaningful approaches calls for a shift towards a culture which centres learning, allows for failure, builds relationships and transparency, captures complexity, and situates impact within a wider social context. Whilst this can feel big and complex, measurement offers a place to start. And if we get it right, shifting the way we measure has the power to shift the wider culture which underpins it.

The measurement inquiry has shown that there is collective momentum from individual and partners across the city motivated to make this change happen. Over the next year our work around the Meaningful Measurement Inquiry will continue to focus on experimenting with Storytelling and Signal - trialling it in new contexts, such as social prescribing. We will also continue to create space for dialogue, reflections and shared learning amongst partners.

We invite you to join us. Share your experiences of measurement, discuss this learning with your team, and share with us what you learn.

With thanks to everyone who attended the Storytelling, Signal and funder and commissioner events, and contributed towards this learning.

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