Pro-active Evaluators: Enabling Research to Be Useful, Usable and Used

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Evidence-based policy making presents challenges for researchers as the pragmatic imperative of delivering 'the right information, at the right time, for the right people' can appear to compromise traditional academic roles and responsibilities. Using the recent evaluation of the UK Cabinet Office-led 'Better Government for Older People' programme as a case study, we discuss attempts to meet these challenges in practice. Our experience confirms that there has been a shift from the assumption of rational models (i.e. that evidence will be used as part of a linear planning process) to a more 'realistic' perspective in which evidence from research requires advocates to promote its potential contribution. In turn, this suggests that it is in the interest of the research community to try to understand the policy-making process, and so design, undertake and disseminate their research in a way that maximizes the likelihood of its use in actively contributing to policy development.

KEYWORDS: action research; evidence-based policy; policy evaluation; role of the evaluator; utilization

Introduction

Evidence-based policy making is a key strand of the UK Government's modernizing agenda. The 1999 White Paper, *Modernising Government*, identified 'learning from experience' as one of seven key principles on which to base a new and more creative approach to policy making. Specifically, the White Paper stated:

Government should regard policy as a continuous, learning process, not as a series of one-off initiatives. We will improve our use of evidence and research so that we understand better the problems we are trying to address. We will make more use of pilot schemes to encourage innovations and test whether they work. (Cabinet Office, 1999)

In a speech to the UK Economic and Social Research Council, David Blunkett MP, then Secretary of State for Education, echoed this commitment and called upon the research community to embrace an augmented role in the policy-making process.

Social science research evidence is central to development and evaluation of policy . . . We need to be able to rely on social science and social scientists to tell us what works and why and what types of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective. (DfEE, 2000)

This renewed emphasis on the need for research evidence to inform UK policy making presents challenges as well as opportunities for researchers. What are the implications of a flood of invitations to evaluate pilots and respond to ministerial priorities with policy-relevant research? What might be the impact on 'blue skies' research and academic independence? How might the 'neutral' roles of researchers be affected? What guarantee is there that research findings will be used in a way that preserves their integrity?

Evaluators have always been interested in the methodological debates concerning knowledge generation. Indeed, considerable energy is expended on designing elegant research to inform policy and practice. In contrast, there has been less emphasis on understanding the ways in which this research knowledge is actually used in practice.

In their recent article on using an evidence-based analysis to develop a strategy to tackle health inequalities, Powell and Exworthy (2001) argue that this is because there seems to have been little thought devoted to actual policy mechanisms. Preskill and Torres (1999) describe the limitations of this 'product orientated' evaluation for constantly evolving organizations and policy environments. A recent article by Ian Sanderson (2000) sought to explain the lack of research utilization in terms of the complexity of the policy-making process. Complexity theory undermines the assumption that policy systems are rational linear processes, into which evaluation findings can be painlessly slotted. Sanderson thus concludes that complexity in policy processes has significant implications for researchers and their skills base. He throws down a challenge to a research community traditionally preoccupied with method and design rather than utilization and effectiveness.

Ultimately it may be our capacity to develop institutional procedures and conditions of 'communicative competence' rather than our traditional preoccupation with 'technical competence' which is more important in our quest to harness evaluation more effectively to the task of addressing complex social problems and improving social welfare. (Sanderson, 2000)

This article looks at the implications of this need for 'communicative competence' in the light of one Government-led policy evaluation. It also draws on the ideas of some of the key proponents of evaluation: Rossi, Freeman and Lipsey, and Cronbach. Rossi et al. (1999) make a distinction between primary and secondary modes of dissemination. While primary dissemination is concerned with the production of detailed findings for funders, the latter includes a wide variety of outputs for different stakeholder audiences including oral reports and short summaries. The authors stress the need for both language and

form to be considered in disseminating findings. Cronbach et al. (1980) discuss the importance of involving a wide range of stakeholders in the evaluation from an early stage in the process in order to enhance the likelihood that the findings will be used.

Using the Better Government for Older People (BGOP) evaluation as a case study, we argue in this article that researchers can be more effective in maximizing the likelihood of their research being used to influence policy and practice if they go beyond their traditional roles of delivering research reports and presenting findings to their funders. In a complex world, researchers also need to identify and use what Balthasar and Reider (2000) describe as 'windows of opportunity'. We would go further than this to suggest that researchers can pro-actively create opportunities for research to play its important role alongside the other forces shaping policy. The implications for the competencies of the researcher in terms of management and communication skills are explored with reference to case study material from the BGOP programme.

Our experience supports the view that some of the most fundamental questions posed by government-commissioned research are around developing appropriate evaluation approaches to ensure the utilization of research findings, and the role of researchers in promoting these more developmental ways of working. Using the experience of the Best Value pilot evaluation, Martin and Sanderson argue that:

Ministers and officials will increasingly look to evaluators to act as change agents who are able to combine summative analysis of outputs and impacts with more formative approaches focused on developing a detailed understanding of processes. (Martin and Sanderson, 1999)

The BGOP evaluation approach was developed in the context of this renewed debate on the value and nature of research evidence. The approach has focused in particular on the potential 'impact' of the evaluation that informed its central tenet to provide findings that were 'useful, useable and used' (Hayden and Boaz, 2000a). In order to achieve this objective the researchers instigated a highly collaborative, formative, action research framework. This article briefly describes the BGOP evaluation design, reports on the efficacy of the approach to the utilization of research findings and draws some conclusions for how future policy evaluations might be approached.

Better Government for Older People

The BGOP programme was originally established in 1998 to pilot a strategic, integrated approach to the changing needs and aspirations of an ageing population. Developed on the basis of partnership between central and local government, the academic community and voluntary organizations, the national Steering Committee established BGOP as a two-year action-research programme with the following aim:

To improve public services for older people by better meeting their needs, listening to their views, and encouraging their contribution. (Hayden and Boaz, 2000b)

The Cabinet Office-led Steering Committee then became responsible for the programme's strategic development and ensuring that the evaluation informed and influenced the Government's modernization agenda. Twenty-eight BGOP pilots across the UK drew together public, private and voluntary agencies to work in partnership with older people in order to 'make a difference'. Each of these set their own local objectives based on consultation with older people on their priorities for action. Both the national evaluation and the local evaluations reflected the diversity of these action plans.

A programme director and small core team of staff based in Wolverhampton supported the pilots and developed the programme. This enabled the establishment of the BGOP Network and the Older People's Advisory Group to share good practice and disseminate the learning from the programme. The evaluation of the programme was carried out by ourselves at the Local Government Centre at Warwick University resulting in the report *Making a Difference* (Hayden and Boaz, 2000b). This report includes information about the programme, the activities of the 28 BGOP pilots, the evaluation findings and policy recommendations.

In contrast to a perceived culture of externally imposed checks and league tables, the formative, action-research BGOP evaluation framework was designed to enable us to:

- **understand why change is needed** – through collection of **baseline information** on demographic and socio-economic trends, issues facing older people, gaps in services etc.;
- **inform on what is possible** – through recording good practice examples with evidence of **effective outcomes** for older people in terms of improved information, services, opportunities etc.;
- **learn how change can be introduced** – through **tracking processes** to determine **critical factors** for a successful strategic approach, e.g. partnership development, older people's engagement, leadership etc.

Information and reports on these three aspects were provided by the local evaluators, designated by each pilot, in response to requests and guidelines as part of the national evaluation framework. Fieldwork interviews with stakeholders in each pilot and observations of pilot activities and events were carried out directly by the national evaluators.

This information was analysed to provide the evaluation report on the BGOP programme across the UK. This was based on combining and contrasting the experiences of the pilots and using examples of pilot activities and local outcomes to illustrate national achievements and learning. As part of the evaluation, pilots were also encouraged to produce their own reports to contribute to local learning and policy development.

In the following section about the ways in which we, as the national BGOP evaluators, have sought to inform policy development, we focus on three aspects of the evaluation approach:

- developing and supporting a network of local evaluators;
- collaboration between evaluators and development staff; and
- researchers acting as advocates for the evaluation findings.

Developing and Supporting a Network of Local Evaluators

A key component of the BGOP programme has been the development of local capacity for research and internal review, and the subsequent generation of a large body of local evaluation material to support the development of the programme. Each pilot was required to nominate a local evaluator. These designated evaluators included academics, local authority officers and councillors and therefore had very different levels of research experience. The use of local evaluators as an integral part of the BGOP evaluation design highlighted the research capacity problems faced by many of the pilots. Against an all too common culture of evaluation being seen as, at best, a luxury and at worst, a necessary evil, many of the local evaluators initially raised concerns over the levels of skills and time that would be required to carry out their role.

Quarterly workshops enabled a network of local evaluators to be developed and supported. As many of the evaluators were anxious about their capacity to carry out their role, initial workshops focused on providing technical and peer support for the evaluation. Evaluators were also encouraged to bring local older people and project directors, with whom they were working, to the workshops to build understanding and ownership of the evaluation. Project directors commented how this also offered them a valuable opportunity to get together with representatives from other pilots as 'critical friends' rather than feeling a pressure to positively promote the achievements of their pilots.

This network of evaluators also contributed to the development of the national evaluation, by acting as a sounding board and commenting on the final report as it developed. This opportunity to share emerging findings with individuals involved in the pilots, and in turn to receive their feedback, proved very useful to us as national evaluators in refining our analysis.

At a local level, our links with the pilot evaluators have been a key tool in promoting the use of evaluation. In addition to developing evaluation methodologies and providing guidance and support, workshop sessions enabled local evaluators to share and compare their findings and explore strategies for using these to promote change in local authorities. At the end of the evaluation period, a specific event drew on the findings of the national and local evaluations to 'mainstream' the work of the pilots (i.e. to ensure that the learning from these experiences would be used to improve local governance and service delivery on an ongoing basis through influencing organizational structures, processes and behaviours).

More recently, we have gathered information from the pilots on this mainstreaming process. The involvement of older people in the pilots has been a key factor in bringing about change in attitudes to, and services for, their generation. Moreover, they have used the national evaluation report to support their collective activities for change, both locally and nationally. However, the pilots have expressed concerns that their efforts to use evaluation locally need to be supported by a commitment from central government to taking on board the recommendations of the programme. This is true for a number of the recommendations that were designed to support change at a local level (e.g. incentivizing

local partnership working through appropriate cross-cutting resources and targets), as well as recommendations for change by government itself (e.g. introducing anti-age discrimination legislation).

Collaboration between Evaluators and Development Staff

Another key partnership strand of the BGOP evaluation approach was the creative working relationship between the national evaluators and the team of development staff. The development team offered support to pilots in developing their work programmes, and organized events and information to enable them to share good practice. The research and development staff met together as a 'core team' once a month to discuss the 'action' and the 'research' aspects of the programme.

Other Government initiatives such as the Best Value pilot programme have not necessarily had a developmental component and as a consequence the evaluators concerned have often been called upon to provide a wide range of information and support to pilots (Martin and Sanderson, 1999). In the case of the BGOP programme, it was hoped that the existence of distinct, but connected, research and development teams would provide appropriate support for the pilots and evaluation of the programme as a whole. However, the researchers continued to be involved in a wide range of 'development activities' in the pilots. There are a number of possible explanations for this.

Firstly, assistance with the action planning process was invariably required prior to the development of a local evaluation plan. Secondly, whereas the researchers made regular visits to the pilots in order to collect data, the developmental part of the core team did not have the staff resources to regularly visit each individual pilot as part of a structured programme. Local project staff seemed to value the opportunity to talk with someone from the national programme about their progress and some of the difficulties encountered. The qualitative interviews began to draw out this information and project staff were invariably keen to continue this more informally once the interviews were finished. Local staff also wanted to draw on the 'comparative' information being gathered by the researchers. Qualitative methods allow for this more reflexive process, but as researchers, we were frequently asked for broader support in terms of developing solutions to deal with local operational difficulties. This takes the researcher into rather less familiar territory.

The distinction between the roles of evaluators and development staff, though in practice blurred at times, proved essential as evidenced at a number of key moments during the course of the programme. As evaluators we sought to maintain an element of distance and objectivity from the implementation of the BGOP programme. By contrast, the nature of the work of the development team seemed to necessitate staff 'buying in' to the programme in order to promote and advocate the work of the pilots and the national, Government-led initiative. This distinction became clear when the research and development teams came together to prepare the final report. The collaborative approach to producing a report owned by all stakeholders, but remaining faithful to the findings of the

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evaluation, was complex and time consuming. During a Steering Committee awayday, devoted to the task, a number of tensions emerged. Whereas the development staff and most Steering Committee members were looking for good news stories to celebrate the achievements of the programme, the researchers were keen to promote wider learning, not only in relation to the critical success factors behind the achievements, but also about some of the difficulties encountered.

The development staff also felt that, to some extent, their performance as individuals was being evaluated as they were responsible for supporting the development (and by implication the success) of the pilots. However, the evaluators were more concerned with assessing the distinctive contribution to the programme of the development team as a whole, rather than appraising the individuals within it. Nevertheless, this proved to be problematic in terms of agreeing the scope of the relevant section of the evaluation report. Members of the Steering Committee, particularly those from the lead Government department, the Cabinet Office, also felt a pressure to show that they had delivered a 'successful programme' and wanted to promote 'best practice' (ideally through a best practice guide), rather than learning, from across the 28 pilots.

There were also differences between researchers and development staff in terms of their attitudes to the role and importance of evaluation. Throughout the programme the researchers were concerned with both the evidence emerging from the formative evaluation and attempts to promote the ethos of evidence-based policy development. Typically, those involved in the wider programme only began to show a real interest in the evaluation towards the end of the two-year pilot, despite the evaluation framework having been produced for the initial launch conference and regular evaluation reports being presented at the Steering Committee. Nevertheless, as the programme neared its end, the research team had been able to build a body of evidence and thus were ready to tap into the growing interests of the development staff and Steering Committee.

Evaluation calls upon a set of research skills that in our view are often misunderstood and possibly underestimated. In the case of the BGOP programme, we were responsible not only for carrying out a national evaluation, but also for facilitating local evaluations in each pilot site, and promoting an evaluation culture as part of the programme. This meant ensuring that the qualitative research carried out was rigorous and valued as such, rather than being seen as one particular subjective view among many. Given the varied experience of the local evaluators and the different degrees of familiarity with research among the Steering Committee and development staff, part of our role as national evaluators was in explaining research design, different research methodologies (and their underpinning paradigms) and how evaluation could be used.

The BGOP programme illustrated the benefits of expanding the role of researcher to encompass the provision of support to pilots, in terms of helping to build local capacity for evaluation and sharing information and good practice within the programme. However, these activities draw upon skills, particularly in terms of management and facilitation, that are not always present in research teams. These demands have implications for the training and development of

research staff. They also have implications for universities through highlighting the tensions between these creative, developmental, policy research roles and the demands of the Research Assessment Exercise.

Researchers Acting as Advocates

The likelihood of research being used to inform and influence policy will, to a large extent, depend on the form in which its findings are made available. Our experience during the BGOP programme has been that effective dissemination not only requires a range of written material aimed at different stakeholders, but also that the evaluators are willing and able to verbally present research findings to different audiences and be prepared to comment on the implications for particular policy areas. To be relevant and effective, this advocacy role has to be explicitly included in the timescale of a pilot programme.

As national evaluators we contributed throughout the programme to the regular bulletin *Stratagem*, to conferences and events, and to other BGOP publications. These publications are available on the programme website (www.bettergovernmentforolderpeople.gov.uk). A series of Warwick research papers (Boaz and Hayden, 2000; Boaz et al., 2000; Hayden and Boaz, 2000a, 2000c; Hayden et al., 2001) have enabled us to explore themes in more detail including the policy debate on 'active ageing' through volunteering, and the importance of user-focused information for older people's access to services, opportunities and entitlements.

A key chapter in the final evaluation report outlined the policy implications of the research and a set of recommendations for action. These were for central and local government, the voluntary sector and older people's organizations. The Cabinet Office asked for six months in which to co-ordinate a Government-wide response to these recommendations. The Government's response was delivered at a final conference in January 2001 following an 'Application Phase' for dissemination of the evaluation findings and for sharing good practice.

This period for dissemination, both for paper and verbal outputs, has been a further distinctive feature of the BGOP evaluation. Often an evaluation comes to an abrupt end with the active phase of the programme, or even before the completion of the programme. The Steering Committee's commitment to disseminating results, and to working with the pilots to 'mainstream' their work proved a useful and unusual component of the study. The luxury of having all staff remaining in place for a further six months after the end of the formal two-year pilot period was a real resource in terms of taking forward the policy implications and recommendations of the programme.

During this phase we met with a number of key individuals from Government departments and other organizations developing new policies with relevance to older people such as the Department of Social Security (now the Department for Work and Pensions), the National Audit Office and the Post Office. Different organizations were interested in the aspects of the programme that linked in with their particular plans and programmes. We attempted to take a creative and pragmatic approach to influencing policy in order to pull the findings 'off the page'.

For example, the Post Office was interested in learning about how to develop its information and advice remit in a way that would be helpful and accessible to older people as part of its modernization programme. Discussions focused in particular on pilot experiences of developing outreach services, working in partnership with community organizations and working with staff able to communicate in minority languages. We have also been invited to various working groups seeking to use the findings of the BGOP evaluation, including Department of Social Security planning meetings for an 'expert seminar' on the image of older people in the media, and 'think tank' discussions on the development of the new Pensions Service. This involvement has built on a relationship between policy makers and researchers which developed through a process of producing a number of pieces of relevant research in this area.

During the course of the BGOP evaluation, we had opportunities to be involved in other, linked research for the Inter-Ministerial Group on Older People, including a qualitative study on the attitudes and aspirations of older people (see Boaz et al., 1999; Hayden et al., 1999). We were also responsible for recording and evaluating the Ministerial Listening to Older People events, using these opportunities to observe and reflect on the different consultation approaches used by Government (Hayden and Boaz, 2000c).

This approach to seeing the BGOP evaluation not in isolation, but as part of a broader policy agenda around older people and the ageing population, allowed us to make important connections to a wider group of policy makers with an interest in the issues emerging from the programme. We were able to triangulate some of the findings in areas that featured in all three pieces of research (for example, the importance of transport in supporting independent living for older people).

We also tried to make connections with other researchers carrying out related policy evaluations, including the Best Value team based at Warwick University. This enabled us to add weight to our findings by drawing on the experiences of both programmes to contribute to the policy debate around, for example, citizen consultation and involvement (see Martin and Boaz, 2000). We were aware of the potential for further work in terms of making links between the various policy evaluations running alongside BGOP. In local pilot interviews, staff often referred to the myriad of Government initiatives and their interconnectedness. However, the amount of time available for the evaluation (and the sheer complexity of the policy environment) often served to thwart attempts to build links with other strands of policy research and evaluation. This remains a challenge for evaluators.

Investment in building ownership of the evaluation has been essential to develop our credibility, as evaluators, to act as advocates, and in turn to enable other stakeholders to feel confident in using the national evaluation to support their own advocacy activities. In particular, many of the older people engaged in the pilots and the Older People's Advisory Group (OPAG) have clearly read the full evaluation report (despite concerns from policy makers that anything beyond a short summary would be off-putting for lay readers). Older people have also used the report in a number of ways. For example, they have used the findings

that demonstrate the importance of actively involving older people in all stages of the service planning and delivery process. References to local pilot activities in the report have also been of use to older people seeking to raise the profile of their work at a local level, to show 'what is possible' and to lobby for additional resources to spread good practice.

The qualitative, participatory approach to evaluation discussed above generated a lot of interest in what would happen as a result of the programme, which then had to be harnessed within the evaluation remit. Evaluators' workshops and the wider BGOP Network events for pilots have supported this, as has the development of an OPAG. We were also requested by the three Scottish pilots to work with them in using a combination of local and national evaluation findings to develop a Scotland-wide strategy for older people in conjunction with the Scottish Executive (Scottish Executive, 2001). By the end of the programme the ownership of the evaluation findings was reported as a real driver for change, locally and nationally.

Nevertheless, there are some elements of the policy process that will inevitably remain outside the sphere of most evaluators' influence. For example, when the research subject matter (i.e. older people) is not seen as a political or organizational priority (as some of the pilots reported) it can be an up-hill battle to get recommendations even heard let alone responded to. However pro-active an evaluator tries to be, success is unlikely if no one is listening. Conversely, when there are opportunities, because a policy process reaches a point where it needs information or specific issues come to the fore (such as during an election), the key individuals may no longer be in a position to present and explain their findings as contract researchers in particular have a tendency to move on. This situation highlights further the importance of investing in a wide ownership and understanding of evaluations.

As Carol Weiss observes, the evaluator has to accept that even when he or she has:

gained commitment from administrators, geared the study to the agency purposes, involved practitioners, conducted a methodologically competent study, completed it in time for decisions and disseminated results briskly, and still the results are ignored. (Weiss, 1998)

Pro-active Evaluators

Our experience from undertaking the national BGOP evaluation has a number of implications for the roles of evaluators. Firstly, it suggests that researchers need to embrace the opportunities presented by the complex policy-making process. This involves not only an understanding of the wider context and timescales in which decisions are made, but also the ability to harness new skills to grasp opportunities as effectively as possible. David Blunkett (DfEE, 2000) suggests that we should learn from the US and create more opportunities for researchers to spend time in government in order to find out more about policy making in practice. Masters programmes and professional development courses should also be used to shape the skills of present and future generations of 'pro-active' researchers.

In addition to this development of research roles, we would also stress the value of working in partnership with development staff and other professionals involved in supporting pilot programmes. Partnership working is not without its challenges, but it provides the potential for evaluators to make available formative evidence on an ongoing basis maximized by close working with key individuals from the start of a programme. In order to guard against threats to the independence of the evaluators, job descriptions, workplans and pre-agreed outputs proved powerful tools in clarifying the role of the BGOP evaluators. The physical separation of the development and evaluation teams and different lines of accountability to the Steering Committee also proved to reinforce the distinction between the two teams.

Finally, building local capacity for evaluation contributes to the development of a wider learning culture able to embrace and use evidence for improved local governance. In some respects the increasing commitment to, and use of, local evaluation during the course of the programme feels like one of the more important achievements. Other programmes, including the Health Action Zones evaluation, have also used local evaluators and there is scope to draw together some of this experience to inform the design of future large-scale evaluations. For example, it would be interesting to explore the resource implications for all those involved, of using local evaluators and involving local people in the evaluation process.

Conclusions

The evidence-based policy and practice approach is often most closely associated with linear and rational models of policy-making (Davies et al., 2000). However, in reality the proponents of evidence-based policy and practice are far from agreed about what counts as evidence and how this evidence can be produced in ways that maximize its utility. In mapping approaches to evidence-based policy and practice in different policy sectors, Davies et al. (2000) reveal a huge diversity in methodological preferences and debates, dissemination strategies etc.

This article uses the BGOP evaluation as a case study to explore the potential for developing further the ways in which evaluation can be useful and used. We have described the different methods of secondary dissemination used to share the evaluation findings with a wide range of stakeholders (Rossi et al., 1999). We have also discussed the ways in which we sought to develop this role further as pro-active partners in the policy-making process.

However, the responsibility for making the rhetoric of evidence-based policy and practice a reality does not rest solely with the research community. We are suggesting that there is also a need for national and local government to become more evidence-based organizations, a view that echoes recent research by Percy-Smith and Sanderson (2000) exploring the research capacity of local government.

In our experience of working closely with local and central government as part of a formative evaluation process, policy making is neither rational nor linear. Different actors, including politicians, civil servants and local authority officers,

and non-governmental stakeholders, will have different goals and face different constraints. Furthermore policies on particular issues are not developed in isolation but influence, and are influenced by, a raft of other policies within a wider political agenda.

In this context the utilization of evaluation findings is more likely to follow the enlightenment model, which suggests that users base their decisions on a gradual synthesis of evaluation results into their overall frame of reference (Weiss, 1997). We would argue that the BGOP evaluation showed that this process, although gradual, is not passive. The evaluation design and dissemination have to be linked to actively identifying opportunities to add to the body of knowledge of policy makers as well as being able to support responses to requests for information, often from unexpected policy-making quarters.

One of these opportunities is the building of networks with a range of different stakeholders. In the BGOP example, the network included individual civil servants to influence government, and BGOP local evaluators and Project Directors to support local authority change processes. We have found it helpful to think of the management of networked relationships as an important role for researchers who wish to see their findings used in policy and practice. In the context of an ongoing relationship it is much easier to identify and respond to opportunities within policy-making cycles. The timing of these will invariably not be consistent with the planned timing of a given evaluation so making research available in appropriate forms at appropriate times becomes essential. With the necessary trust and communication, however, it is possible to provide information from emerging findings as well as drawing on previous results.

As Cronbach et al. (1980) suggest, involving stakeholders from an early stage in the process builds a powerful degree of ownership of the findings. However, the resource implications of adopting a pro-active, developmental approach are considerable, in terms of skills, training and time for both evaluators and other stakeholders. For example, researchers are often working on short-term contracts and need to move on to the next project as soon as the funded period of evaluation is over. It is often difficult for them to find time to continue promoting the research findings. In the case of BGOP, the evaluation required an investment from a wide range of stakeholders including local partner organizations (in terms of staff and other resources), and older people (who gave their valuable time to the process).

To work creatively in a complex and messy environment, researchers need to develop the sort of skills that Jackson and Stainsby (2000) have identified to manage networks. These are: building trust; opening channels of communication; creating a sense of (a linked) future; information provision; and the design of incentives for co-operation. Underlying all these is also the ability to put oneself, as a researcher, in the client's or potential client's shoes in order to understand the needs of the policy maker or practitioner and realize that no-one is obliged to use the research. As in partnerships more generally, everything is up for negotiation!

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