Executive Summary: Policy Lab Healthy Later Living in a time of Covid

Centre for the Analysis of Social Policy (CASP)

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Partners

Age UK Bristol

Age UK South Gloucestershire

Bristol Ageing Better

Bristol City Council

Bristol Dementia Action Alliance

Bath & North East Somerset Council

BANES Carers Centre

Bath & North East Somerset Swindon
& Wiltshire Clinical Commissioning Group

NHS Bristol

North Somerset & South Gloucestershire
Clinical Commissioning Group

Royal United Hospitals Bath

South Gloucestershire Council

South Gloucestershire Chinese Association

South Gloucestershire Dementia Action Alliance

South Gloucestershire Over 50s Forum

South Gloucestershire Race Equality Network

West of England Combined Authority

Local Experts by Experience

Authors

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Executive Summary

The CASP project's aim was to develop a University of Bath (UoB) Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) Faculty wide Policy Lab (PL) initiative to approach policy issues using innovative design orientated methods.

The UoB is also committed to engaging locally to ensure maximum benefits of their research can be shared and applied to local community issues and activities. Building on the small number of existing PL models in UK public policy settings, the project sought to enhance these new approaches in two key ways:

- first by building capacity and capability through the Centre for the Analysis of Social Policy (CASP) in the HSS which would have a regional and local basis; and

- second by involving service users by experience (including carers) in the PL sessions, which has not been a feature of initiatives such as the UK Cabinet Office PL programme.

Policy Labs (PLs) were planned for three administrative areas within the West of England Combined Authorities Area (WECA). These are Bath and North East Somerset (BaNES), Bristol and South Gloucestershire (S Gloucestershire). A final Regional PL was held for the whole WECA area to discuss feedback from the local PLs and future plans. The topic for the PLs was Healthy Ageing (subsequently retitled to Healthy Later Living) which also ties in well with the UoB Healthy Later Living campaign and network.

The process of building the PL team, designing the events and developing the networks and contacts to support the events was established and the first PL for BaNES was held in March 2020. The findings from this event assisted the project to enhance the understanding of best practice on PLs, and lessons learned from the first event were included in planning for the next two PLs for Bristol and S Gloucestershire. These two PLs were held in March 2021 since the intervention of the COVID-19 (Covid) pandemic prevented the project from delivering all events as planned in 2020. The Covid pandemic has had a significant impact for carers and older people and the second two PLs have addressed the issues raised by the pandemic in relation to healthy later living.

The project was funded by the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) programme through the UoB. Full description of the process and issues from the PLs are described in more comprehensive reports submitted to the UoB, which include details of the presentations and discussions for the PLs. This document provides a summary of the key findings and conclusions of the PLs, including a critique of the PL process used in the project. And how it might be taken forward.

Ethics

The study received a favourable ethical opinion following ethical review from the Social Science Research Ethics Committee (SSREC) at the University of Bath, REF: S20-009 on Monday 17 February 2020. Due to Covid, an amendment to allow the policy labs to move online was provided with an ethical opinion from SSREC provided on 8 January 2021.

The Policy Lab Process: Procedures & Issues including COVID-19 Complications - building capacity & capability

In order to successfully develop new approaches and solutions to difficult social policy issues, PLs need to combine people with experiential knowledge (e.g., service users) with professionals, policymakers, and academics - experts who might not always all work together. This project has made excellent progress in this respect by combining the experience of a range of academics and policymakers with service users. This cross fertilisation of expertise has been evident in the work of designing the PL events and engaging with outside organisations.

Using knowledge about PLs nationally and internationally, applying best practice developed elsewhere, and the lessons learned from the experience of the CASP PL project has resulted in an excellent foundation for taking the project forward. Much progress has been made towards the goal of establishing a fully functioning model and capacity to offer PLs to the widest range of issues and external partners.

Engaging External Partners

Although PLs have been staged in Whitehall by the Cabinet Office (under the banner of Government as a System) the concept and approach are by no means common knowledge and the ideas behind PLs are still relatively new. However, the experience of engaging with external organisations indicated how the potential benefits were quickly and easily understood. In the instance of healthy later living - the first topic to be presented - there was a warm welcome for the ideas from key statutory agencies in Local Government and the NHS – PL Partners. Several leading colleagues expressed support and enthusiasm for the proposals and committed to attend and contribute to the agenda.

The issues raised by the pandemic have perhaps enhanced the commitment to engage in the PL process by these key Partner groups and there appeared to be a strong appetite to maintain their involvement in the project going forward, including extending the reach to other public policy topics. Local and regional government as well as health and social care service providers and charities indicate this is a helpful process in assisting improvement in cooperation between all groups involved in improving healthy later living.

Involving Service Users

Whilst it is always challenging to involve service users in events of this kind and ensure that materials are accessible enough to enable them to fully contribute to the debates, the experience of the project was very positive. It certainly fully justifies the approach being developed of seeing service users as an integral and essential element of future PLs, which are not just another form of focus group, in which the public as service users are asked preset questions within a defined framework. It is an essential feature of PLs that the presentation of research materials, and their centrality to the subsequent debates on possible solutions, makes the public/service users equal and full participants in the process alongside experts and policymakers. There was considerable interest among service users to attend and participate in the PLs, and they were key contributors at all events.

Working virtually in the PLs

Due to the Covid outbreak the PLs for Bristol and S Gloucestershire had to be postponed from March 2020 and were rescheduled for March 2021. With the continued lockdown restrictions, a new approach to facilitating the PLs was introduced and they were held virtually with all attendees invited to join via an online virtual meeting.

A further Regional PL was held on 28th April 2021 on the theme 'Feedback and the Future'. The key issues to emerge from the local PLs were addressed to consider how the PL approach can assist all interested stakeholders in taking forward solutions to address these issues. The event also considered feedback regarding the usefulness of the PL process and how it might assist in addressing additional areas of interest or concern to stakeholders.

Planning

Invitees included the same groups for the in-person and virtual events - i.e., policymakers from Local Authorities, Clinical Commissioning Groups, NGOs and service users with lived experiences of healthy later living. The virtual approach meant some challenges and opportunities compared to the in-person attendance approach. For planning meetings with the interested partners the on-line platform meant it was easier for them to engage quickly. For service users, it presented additional challenges to ensure they had access to and were comfortable with the digital approach. After consultations with users several were happy to join the main events and participate directly. Upskilling digital needs for users was also an option if needed.

CASP Policy Lab Format

The in-person event allowed for initial suggestions of issues of importance which were then discussed in Plenary to focus on what were agreed to be the key issues of interest. For the virtual events issues from pre discussions with users and those raised at the first PL were addressed during the live event. In addition results from local surveys undertaken during the pandemic were also used to identify key issues for discussion. Prior to the events, attendees were provided with the Agenda - for the virtual events highlighting key discussion issues to be discussed at the PLs. The service users were contacted to explain the format and process of the event to them.

The general format of the PLs was as follows:

Plenary Session

- Welcome and Introductions.

- Outline of the PL proceedings for the day including an explanation of what a PL is and aims to achieve.

- Presentations on the context for healthy later living from the national and local perspectives. The local presentations were given by local service providers (Partners).

- A presentation on initial results from local surveys relating to the local experiences of older people and carers on issues arising during Covid.

Breakout Groups

- Groups were used to initially define and then discuss the key issues relating to healthy later living and Covid experiences.

Final Plenary Session

- Reporting from the results of discussions from the Breakout Groups to all attendees.

- Summary and outline conclusions from the event and planned next steps following the PL.

Time for questions and discussion was included at several stages during the proceedings to address any issues or concerns participants wanted to address.

Participation & activities
at the events

To enable a virtual PL event to run quickly and smoothly, additional planning is needed compared to an in-person event where introductions and handovers can be less time constrained or formalised. Pre PL liaison with Partners regarding their presentations was undertaken to ensure efficient handover between presentations and discussions.

The key themes identified from the local surveys and discussions with local people regarding their lived experiences, together with the issues raised in the first PL for BaNES, were addressed at the subsequent PLs. The BaNES PL took place the day after it was announced that the first Covid lockdown would be imposed the following week. There were therefore a number of cancellations due to the need for attendees to undertake rapid forward planning due to lockdown restrictions. The event continued in the planned format but with fewer breakout groups and was considered to be a success by invitees as assessed by the event evaluation feedback.

A key feature of the PL is the effective discussion of the key issues raised concerning the subject matter. During the meeting, attendees were divided into Breakout Groups and invited to suggest issues and solutions relating to healthy later living and related issues resulting from the Covid pandemic. The themes and additional issues raised were considered during the breakout group discussions. Attendees were invited to contribute to discussions in the breakout groups by commenting in person, on the Whiteboards or on the Chat function and instructions on how to do these were given.

The virtual PL approach also proved very successful. Having more than three breakout rooms would be challenging in terms of reporting back to the Plenary sessions and keeping the whole virtual event to a manageable length. For a larger event, an in-person format is likely to be more beneficial, particularly for managing plenary discussions and the opportunity for attendees to have informal discussions which are an important part of PLs, where fostering the interaction between all interested parties, (for the WECA PLs: academia, service providers and users) is a key objective. zVirtual pre-PL planning meetings with various interested parties were successful and could continue to be an efficient part of the PL process whether the actual events are in-person or virtual.

Key issues & solutions

A number of key themes and issues emerged in relation to healthy later living and also taking into account the recent Covid experience. Some key issues to emerge include the following:

- Consideration of healthy later living should start at earlier stages of life.

- Difficulties regarding access to support services/ respite for carers.

- The impact of a lack of activity and social isolation on mental and physical health and confidence.

- Reliance on informal support from friends, family and neighbours.

- Difficulties accessing local services (health, transport, shopping etc.).

- Technology: digital literacy and resources.

- Difficulties relating to identifying who needs help including language and literacy barriers for ethnic minority populations.

- Covid specific issues relating to shielding, Care Homes and hospitalisation.

- Dementia has many specific issues both pre and during covid, including lost access to facilities during the pandemic.

Possible solutions discussed included:

- Co-production in service supply between groups providing services was enhanced during the pandemic and this success could be built on in future.

- 'One-stop shop' for services information could be helpful.

- Working in a more preventative way to keep people active and engaged earlier on in their lives and prepare better for their futures.

- Peer to peer support amongst older people can be very helpful for many issues of concern.

- Engage the older population more for volunteering.

- Consider innovative ways for funding services, including businesses to offer more in support for healthy later living.

Evaluation feedback

After the local PL events, attendees were invited to complete evaluation forms with questions asking how they found the event. Overall, the evaluation responses were very positive; all respondents indicated that they either agreed or strongly agreed with all the positive statements relating to the format, content, structure and delivery of the PL event. All respondents said that they strongly agreed that the virtual event was easy to access. Positive feedback made by respondents particularly related to the inclusive interactive format bringing together academic, service users and professionals, particularly during the breakout groups which allowed everyone to contribute, as well as the informative presentations. The majority of respondents said they would recommend the event they had attended to others as it was an opportunity for them to learn, participate and they felt hopeful about change from the event.

Some constructive criticism and suggestions from respondents included a wish for future events to be face to face, longer for discussion and more time to explore the results of the discussions. Some felt there should have been more service user participants and time to listen to their perspectives.

Regional Policy Lab

The issues raised at the local PLs were addressed in the Regional PL. Service users were invited to give presentations and these were warmly welcomed and appreciated by service providers and all others who attended. Some key conclusions to emerge from the Regional PL were:

- There is strong support to use the experiences of Covid in future service planning.

- Involvement of older people in the design and implementation of issues affecting them is essential.

- Digital poverty is an issue for many during the later living stage but continued support with such technology is necessary for benefits of upskilling to be maintained.

- PLs are particularly beneficial and add additional rigour through bringing together academics, service providers and those with lived experience to discuss issues and policies in an independent 'safe place'.

- The PL process is flexible and agile and can evolve to meet changing circumstances and new issues.

Conclusions & recommendations

PLs methodology is a feasible way of enabling local and regional decision-making processes. A number of important points emerged during the design and staging of the PLs which can be addressed further for future work on the key issues which could be addressed through the PL process. They include:

- The importance of PL sessions being based strongly on evidence and research in the given fields in order to achieve one of the key goals of sharing material which would not always be known to all those involved. Our PLs raised questions about how much material can reasonably be presented within a session, how much should otherwise be circulated in advance and the level of detail needed for specific agenda pieces.

- For service users/public the importance of the research and evidence is critical to ensure they can quickly absorb sufficient detail to be able to contribute fully, and to level up the knowledge of all participants in the debates. Consideration of the scale of material and its complexity, and whether it is reasonable to expect participants to review detailed material in advance is needed. Alternative options might include staging a PL over a longer period of time e.g. two days, with for example a first half day devoted to the presentation, analysis of evidence and research without user involvement. The results of that work could then by synthesised and more accessible presentations prepared for a second stage with the full range of participants the next day. This might help deepen the evidence base for the PL without reducing the full involvement of the public/service users. Future PL design may also need to consider allowing more space and time for people, including the public/service users to talk earlier in the process.

- The length and timing for the PLs sessions is also important, particularly whether it is an in-person attended or virtually attended event. Smaller attendance numbers may suit a virtual event while also recognising that different topics may well work best in different configurations.

- Covid and its consequences mean that global rethinking of public policy is taking place on many issues including health, social care, climate, food certainty etc. There is also therefore an opportunity to align the UoB work with PL developments in other countries. Moving the PL agenda further afield and learning from other countries could help bring additional solutions to social policy issues in the WECA region.

CASP Policy Lab Team June 2021

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