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Demonstrating value in chaos: The elephant in the room

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Abstract

This paper discusses issues and challenges of proving impact of micro social enterprises. The paper draws on the discussions at an event attended by representatives of Local Authorities, consultants, academics and practitioners in Manchester in March 2012 that were invited experts to grapple with the issues for micro (below five full time equivalents) social enterprises in proving their value to stakeholders.

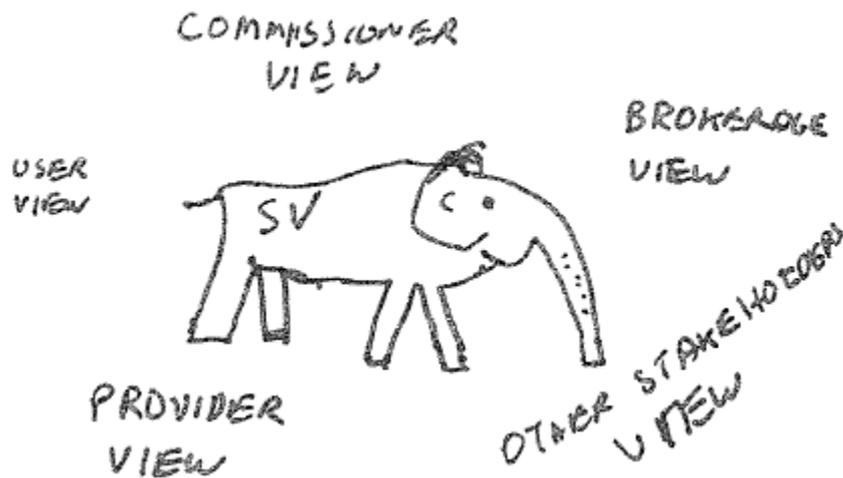
The event was entitled, '*Demonstrating value in chaos*', to stimulate interest in discussing value in the chaos of new markets being shaped, in light of recent government third sector policies and the potential of a much bigger role in the delivery of public services for the third sector. The event sought to go beyond a SROI verses SAA debate, drawing on specific examples of organisations that are utilizing a number of ways of demonstrating value.

The research was part of an ESRC funded Business Placement Scheme project in which the authors worked in partnership with Community Catalysts CIC, a social enterprise that supports micro-providers and assists local authorities in stimulating enterprise. Community Catalysts is under pressure to evidence the impact of micro-providers in the personalisation of adult social care. Yet this paper extends beyond personalisation in grappling with the issues for wider social enterprise/third sector micro-enterprises.

The paper is qualitative in nature and sits within a focus group methodology. This relied on copious note taking and other forms of evidence gathered during the event, which included participants taking part in activities with stickers, post it's and stimulated debates. Four of the co-authors were deployed on the day to capture as much as they could of the discussions.

The discussion threads presented in this paper are both a mix of pre-designed topics and more grounded topics that surfaced on the day. The cryptic inclusion in the title of the paper of *the elephant in the room*, was a drawing captured from one participant during the day in an analogy of the recent and potentially game changing Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 that recently went through UK parliament, which is discussed from participant perceptions in the paper.

The paper is shaped around social impact tools and micro-enterprises, including an example of how a Local Authority supported a micro social enterprise through an SROI audit and the learning that came out of that journey. The findings are context specific in nature and are indicative of the threads of discussions that took paths as they did on the day. Some themes we recognise from the literature as we seek to gather and draw some implications and conclusions from what was a thought provoking and reflective day with experts at the forefront of this subject.



Keywords: Micro-Enterprises, Impact Measurement, SROI, SAA, Social Value, Toolkits.

Introduction

Monitoring and evaluation, evidencing impact and proving value are familiar words in the management of any business - none more-so than in social value led organisations where proving impact is arguably given greater scrutiny than in the private sector (Tracey, *et al.*, 2005; Munoz, 2009). Concurrently, in times of austerity, value for money and investment of public money in service providers is further highlighted – yet on the 8th March 2012 that changed. The long established traditions of the market ideology where the only consideration in the process of what represents value for money was until now, purely based on price. What changed? - The passing through Parliament of The Public Services (Social Value) Act. The Social Value Act is described as a ‘*game changer*’ (Boyle 2012) and heralded as a ‘*revolution*’ for social enterprises in the National press (for further see the Guardian, 8th March 2012). The Public Services (Social Value) Act is;

*“An Act to require public authorities to **have regard to economic, social and environmental well-being** in connection with public services contracts; and for connected purposes.”*

(Source: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2012/3/enacted>; emphasis added)

Those few words can potentially mean so much. The Act goes beyond the moral values of Civil Servants; the onus is now on creating systems and structures that can implement the law. A crucial aspect of the transparency and substantiation public authorities will inevitably draw on are the outcomes and evidence base of efficiencies in economic terms balanced with considerations for social and environmental well-being. If this is the case then proving impact is a *sine qua non*.

Demonstrating value in chaos: The elephant in the room is more than just a title. Since the middle part of the 2000’s when in the UK the Social Value Bill was in its infancy many have grappled with the why, what, where, when and how questions concerning the transaction between public service funded contracting/commissioning (the role of the state), service providers, in particular the value proposition of third sector organisations and service users (*customers* in a market ideology). The big questions being: How can a service provider prove their social impact? What mechanisms and approaches (methodologies) are there? (and which if any are preferred or stipulated by those commissioning?) and What implications and challenges does this bring to organisations? – particularly for micro-enterprises – which represents the vast proportion of providers of services in a given locality (after-all, localism is a natural outcome of the Act). The concerns are well known; small organisations lack the resources of larger businesses (Scase and Goffee 1980); There are skills gaps issues for small social organisations (The Social Investment Taskforce 2000); there are methodological concerns between the ways organisations could (if capable) capture social value (Ridley-Duff and Bull 2011) and there are concerns as to whether the commissioners of services value the social value reported on by providers (Munoz, 2009).

This paper seeks to get between the gaps of the cracks in the chaos the Act has created. We give space to reflect on some of the issues that are pertinent to this time, where the ‘Bill’ became an ‘Act’, and particularly what this meant for people in the room at our focus group – which happened just 7 days after the law was passed in parliament.

We start by looking at the literature, reviewing tools that aid in the process of proving impact. We then turn to the methodologies drawn on within this paper before discussing the findings, assessing the implications and drawing some conclusions.

Understanding toolkits

There are numerous toolkits intended for third sector and social enterprises (nef, 2009; Gibbon and Dey, 2011; Lyon and Arvidson, 2011). Paton (2003) describes an *audit explosion* in the sector (also see Power 1996). Mole and McLaughlin (2006) reported that there are 155 diagnostic tools available for Business Link advisors to use with clients - they may not all be in use (or useful) but the sheer quantity highlights the vast range of tools for business. Are they all the same? Do they all do the same thing? Are there different types of tools and toolkits? Organisations often struggle to ascertain what tools, frameworks, and approaches are actually on offer, to make informed choices about whether or not to utilise them, and which to select (Ford et al., 2011). Although there has been an increase in the use of toolkits, diagnostics, evaluation and benchmarking tools in the internet age, the topic is relatively under researched in the social enterprise and business management literatures. Adapted from Bull *et al* (2009), we propose 3 levels of tools, indicated in Table 1¹. Differentiating levels of complexity is useful in terms of comparing between tools. Table 2 extends to include the method, input, output, resource (time and effort, resources, skills, complexity, cost implications) and also maps the 10 social impact tools, as listed on the nef (New Economics Foundation 2009) website; www.proveandimprove.org against their levels of complexity. Some require payment for permission for use and/or for external validation. All inevitably involve to some extent administrative burdens in collecting and recording information.

Level 1 – Checklist tools	A time specific checklist tool of a given situation that provides tangible and immediate output (for example guidance of what you need to set up a business or how you should go about exporting – these types of diagnostics might be ‘best practice’ guides.)
Level 2 – Evaluation tools	A time specific tool to evaluate a given situation that produces specific/sophisticated analysis that may recommend revisiting for re-assessment). Evaluation tools provide frameworks for users to either populate with their own data, or support decisions within these tools with evidence of some sort.
Level 3 – Management system toolkits	A complex toolkit that requires on-going time and resource effort in a continuous learning and implementation cycle. These tools require on-going investment and resources. They are detailed and in-depth but can be beneficial for breaking down multiple and complex situations into manageable data outputs. Users of these toolkits can in some instances compare and benchmark their performance. These toolkits provide a structure to systematically evidence performance. They tend to require on-going input and management and require many hours of time.

Table 1: Overview of complexity levels of tools, adapted from Bull et al (2009).

¹ The original paper Bull *et al* (2009) indicated 4 levels, for this paper levels 1 and 2 were so similar we decided to amalgamate the two levels – hence this table is an adaption of the original.

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Level	Checklist tools	Evaluation tools	Management system toolkits
Method	Quick questionnaire identifying areas for attention and a checklist prior to embarking on new activities	In-depth one off or annual analysis tools requiring data to be input to populate the framework for conversion to a report with diagrams or other	On-going in-depth analysis toolkit requiring data to be input to populate the framework for conversion to a report with diagrams or other
Input	Light - approx 1hr remote (online) self-assessment task.	Medium - approx 1 day – 1 week of time. Self or facilitated tasks (face-to-face or remote) require some level of skill, knowledge and subject information in order to populate the tool with data. Relies on some level of data collection, amount and sophistication varies between tools. May also require external verification.	Heavy - approx weekly or daily tasks. Self or facilitated tasks (face-to-face) require some level of skill, knowledge and subject information in order to populate the tool with data. Relies on high level of data collection amount and sophistication varies between tools. May also require external verification.
Outcome	Best Practice guides from A to B. Clear progression route for development. Short term outlook.	In-depth report that can provide complex analysis of a situation (or situations), identified key performance indicators and in some instances suggested solutions for development. Tend to be medium term outlook.	In-depth report that can provide complex analysis of a situation (or situations), identified key performance indicators and in some instances suggested solutions for development. Tends to cover medium, long term outlook
Resource; Time and effort, resources, skills, complexity, cost implications	Low. One off	Medium. One off or annual re-assessment	High. Ongoing continuous activity
Examples	Co-operative Environmental and Social Performance Indicators (CESPIs) Eco-mapping	Local Multiplier 3 (LM3) Prove It! Social Impact Measurement for Local Economies (SIMPLE) Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit	AA1000 Assurance Standard Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) Framework Social Accounting and Audit (SAA) Social Return on Investment (SROI)

Table 2: Overview of types of tools

As can be seen from Table 2, 2 tools have been plotted as level 1 (checklist tools). The Co-operative Environmental and Social Performance Indicators (CESPIs) is a checklist to assess a co-operative against the principles of the business model. Eco-mapping, is a tool that maps environmental impact of a given locality, the tool provides a systematic review of environmental issues and requires little prior knowledge or time to conduct.

4 tools have been plotted as level 2 (evaluation tools). Local Multiplier 3 (LM3) is a tool that highlights an organisations spending power on the local economy, something used as a one off or annual exercise by organisations that requires a relatively short amount of time investment over a mid-term period which includes supplier survey and presents a figure that represents for every pound spent in the local economy, the total impact on the local economy is x pounds. Prove It!, is a tool that nef describes as a 3 step process; decide what to measure (storyboard); collect information through a survey and conduct a project reflection workshop. The tool involves community engagement and a level of knowledge and time commitment to the one off (or per project) assessment. Social Impact Measurement for Local Economies (SIMPLE), published in Social Enterprise Journal (McLoughlin *et al* 2009) explains,

“The impact model offers a five-step approach to impact measurement called SCOPE IT; MAP IT; TRACK IT; TELL IT and EMBED IT. These steps help SE managers to conceptualise the impact problem; identify and prioritise impacts for measurement; develop appropriate impact measures; report impacts and embed the results in management decision making.” (2009:154).

The tool provides in depth analysis and requires a level of knowledge and time commitment to the annual assessment. Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit measures the impact of volunteering against the following areas; physical, human, economic, social and cultural capital through a number of questionnaires, involves an impact assessment, possibly focus groups and diaries in terms of gathering data.

At the most complex level, level 3 (management system toolkits), there are also 4 tools plotted. AA1000 Standard Assurance is a tool for performance assurance. The tool is high in complexity, skills, time commitments and is an ongoing approach to organisations interested in sustainability reporting. The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) Framework is also a sustainability reporting framework. The tool is a comprehensive disclosure reporting system that calls for performance indicators, materiality, stakeholder inclusiveness and completeness within its philosophical approach to the system. Highly complex in nature the toolkit requires skills, time and energy to implement. The final two tools, SROI and SAA are discussed in more detail below.

We move on to the work of Freer Spreckley (1981), which is under-referenced in this field, highlighting many years ago the **seven key principles** involved in social auditing (see Table 3). The scope of Spreckley’s principles can be seen in the characteristics of other models, namely, the two tools that have taken the most attention over the last decade; Social Accounting and Auditing (SAA) and Social Return on Investment (SROI) (see Table 3). Notably, the profile of these two tools lies in the resources each has received; SAA through a dedicated conference event, training and toolkit manual and a network of SAA approved sector consultants. Likewise, SROI through The Roberts Enterprise Development Fund (REDF), New Economics Foundation (nef) and UK governments of

England and Scotland, Scholten & Franssen (Amsterdam, NL) and European SROI Network (ESROIN) (and conference) and again a network of SROI approved sector consultants. For a detailed comparison of the two tools, see Gibbon and Dey, 2011.

Ridley-Duff and Bull (2011) distinguish between the two tools SAA, as qualitative and SROI as quantitative. SAA, starts from an organisation’s stated objectives and seeks to evidence how it makes impact within its community. The Social Audit Network states SAA involves **eight key principles** that underpins its process (see Table 3). Pearce and Kay (2005, 2008) state the SAA tool is designed for small values-driven organisations. The 80 page social accounting and auditing manual (Pearce and Kay 2005) outlines a preparation stage, it calls ‘getting ready’, prior to three stages; (1) planning – understanding your organisation, the values, objectives and the stakeholders; (2) accounting - deciding on the scope, agreeing indicators and data collection and devising a social accounting plan; (3) reporting and audit – drafting the accounts, going to panel and dissemination. The social accounting and auditing manual (Pearce and Kay 2005) outlines the framework builds on existing documentation and organisational knowledge. Yet also talks of ‘understanding’, ‘commitment’, ‘resources’ and ‘making the decision to proceed’ – which could be daunting to very small enterprises from the outset. This resistance, fear and uncertainty is acknowledged by Gibbon (2010).

Seven principles according to Spreckley	Eight principles of SAA ²	Seven principles of SROI ³
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Multi-perspective / stakeholders 2. Comprehensive 3. The organisation should learn from the exercise by comparing performance over time with other, similar, organizations; 4. Regular and embedded. 5. Verified 6. Published 7. The process should underpin a philosophy of continuous improvement. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Clarify Purpose 2. Define Scope 3. Engage Stakeholders 4. Determine Materiality 5. Make Comparisons (benchmarking) 6. Be Transparent 7. Verify Accounts 8. Embed the process 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Involve stakeholders 2. Understand what changes 3. Value the things that matter (financial proxies) 4. Only include what is material 5. Do not over-claim 6. Be transparent 7. Verify the result

Table 3: Comparisons across principles in social auditing tools

Ridley-Duff and Bull (2011), state SROI as quantitative as the tool seeks to place a financial value to the process, which although similar in many ways to the SAA, the reduction to a number brings a different approach to the reporting and audit process. The flow of the process is from; scope out and decide about stakeholder involvement; impact map, identify input; evidence outcomes and attribute

² <http://www.socialauditnetwork.org.uk/getting-started/what-is-social-accounting-and-audit/>

³ <http://www.thesroinetwork.org/what-is-sroi>

a value; eliminate displacements; calculate the ratio and disseminate report. Gibbon and Dey (2011) highlight;

“The use of positive or negative impact within an SROI calculation is open to manipulation depending upon those doing the calculating” (2011:68).

SROI attempts to monetise impact and so appears to offer consistent (benchmarkable), clear evidence attractive to policy-makers, fundraisers and investors. Although the selection of indicators and use of proxies can be highly subjective and benchmarking between organisations is something to be avoided (SROI Network 2012). The SROI Network outlines that SROI involves **seven key principles** as outlined in the 108 page guide (see Table 3).

SROI Network and SAN for SAA, have both moved recently to acknowledge the shared philosophies of each other’s tools. A document co-written by both organisations conveys that the similarities are more important than the differences, and that they were both developed along similar principles, as highlighted by our table.

As the principles show, the level of analysis and engagement required in operationalising social auditing is a level 3 in Bull’s descriptor, therefore requiring an appropriate investment of time, energy and resources to implement.

The rationale in the literature for undertaking and embracing tools is somewhat of a given (Nicholls, 2009). Paton (2003) hints motive plays a part in practitioner’s engagement in performance measurements. As Ridley-Duff and Bull (2011) articulate;

“They [social enterprises] may wish: to develop relationships with (different) stakeholders; to demonstrate competitive advantage; to improve performance; to satisfy funders’ requirements. Each motive influences what is counted, how it is valued, and the level of willingness to change measures in the future. While it is assumed that social enterprise members will not be enthused in equal measure by these rationales, the disparity between the rhetoric and reality can sometimes be stark.”

Ridley-Duff and Bull (2011: pp 242-243)

The reliance of motive is an interesting point, from the small business literature, Jennings and Beaver (1997) highlight the differences in the motivations of small business managers to their counterparts in larger organisation, where the reality of the resources at play differ considerably. The issues of the reality of impact measurement is also picked up in Mook *et al.*, (2007), they discuss the role of the social accountant in the organisation as ‘active participants in shaping the reality’ of impact measures and measurement (2007:7). The embeddedness of the small business manager as an active participant of the reality of small firms is acknowledged in the small business literature (Scase and Goffee 1980). Yet, time poor as mentioned, the role of ‘social accountant’ within micro/small organisations is problematic, where these organisations are run by few or one key worker/manager, who’s role is to wear many hats from business development through to service delivery, where the capacity to undertake this role is questionable. The purpose, motive and reality is further highlighted by Gordon (2009) in his estimates of between £2000 – 3000 for SAA and £19-25,000 for SROI of costs associated with implementing the systematic social accounting frameworks.

We now turn to the methodology of the research that links from the acknowledgement that the knowledge and development in the theme of impact measurement is played out in practice as it is as much in theory, where the public sector, sector consultants as well as academics are informing this space.

Methodology

As stated in the abstract, this paper is based on the discussions of participants at an event and as such draws on group interview (see Merton et al 1956) and focus group (see Morgan 1998) methodologies. According to Collis and Hussey (2003) focus groups capture feelings and opinions of a group of people stimulated to discuss a situation. Kitzinger (1994) also describes focus groups as ways of exploring a specific set of issues with a specific set of people in a focussed and organised setting, where interaction and engagement between people in the room generates a rich source of data.

The participants within this focus group were invited 'experts' in either/all areas of focus (measuring social outcomes, toolkits, health and social care, micro-enterprises). Their backgrounds and profession were; (i) people working in health and well-being organisations, civil society organisations; (ii) consultants in the voluntary/social enterprise sector, in health, social care or related fields and (iii) academics with interests across these fields. In total there were 13 people, as the session wore on some participants did drift away, we retained 9 members for the duration of the session.

This paper draws on themes relating to micro-enterprises, tools and impact, rather than personalisation and health and social care *per se*. Yet we acknowledge the sector this paper is written within and recognise the participants in particular are who they are – representing different domains of interest in arriving at an interest in demonstrating value. These domains of interest are particularly evident in participant references to *micro-providers* – that we simply refer to as micro-enterprises within the context of the paper in discussing how small and micro social enterprises can evidence the value of their work.

Wilkinson (2004) states that focus groups require moderators or facilitators, people that keep the discussions flowing, posing questions to the group as a whole and enabling the group members to participate fully. The lead author of this paper took that role, whilst the co-authors sat strategically, as we divided the group into four smaller group discussions prior to bringing it together as one later in the session. In order to steer and provide questions for discussion each table had a topic and we stimulated discussions with two or three open questions for participants to begin debating the issues between them. We also requested ideas and topics (on Post-It notes) for discussion in the second half of the session, so that the session was useful to participants and the learning on the day was mutual between all those involved.

We were also aware of our participation in the discussions as researchers *in* the group, not *out* the group, mindful of Morgan (1998) in that researchers are an active part of the group dynamics and its interactions. The four researchers within each of the four groups all made copious hand written

notes from their discussions that were later pooled prior to content and thematic data analysis. In the next section we discuss the exchanges of ideas towards drawing out some implications that could be of interest in the development of this field of research.

Findings and discussion

In this section we present and discuss the findings from the focus group. In order to present the data in a meaningful way we structure this section around the programme of the day and the discussions as they happened around the room. As outlined in the methodology, this paper focuses on the discussions in connection to impacts and not personalisation and health and social care *per se*—which were themes of the focus group that we did not want to draw on here, choosing to focus on a demonstrating impact in micro/small third sector organisations theme. However, as we present the data terminologies and language such as *micro-providers* are used by participants – for the benefit of this article, we see this as one form of *micro-enterprise* and refer to them as such in our analysis.

After an ice breaker the first speaker and presentation from Julie Cheetham, Assistant Director, NHS North West, introduced the audience to the North West Social Value Foundation, which launched in November 2010 and was set up to harness the development of the social value concept across NHS NW provider and commissioner organisations. The Foundation commits itself to innovate, inspire and invest in order to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of communities in everything they do. She stated, the mission and values are to encourage NHS organisations to;

- ▶ Commission, procure and provide services that maximises the delivery of added social value
- ▶ Drive cultural change so all staff to see themselves as ‘special’ members of their community
- ▶ Foster and encourage local initiatives
- ▶ Sustain a diverse range of partnership arrangements to enhance the capability of NHS organisations to make bespoke contributions to Social Value initiatives.
- ▶ Reward successful initiatives that add real social value to their communities

The Social Value Act legislation provides a springboard for the Foundation in the North West to continue to influence change. Julie outlined the importance of the Act;

- ▶ The Public Services (Social Value) Act, for the first time, all public bodies in England and Wales are required to consider how the services they commission and procure might improve the Economic, Social and Environmental well-being of the area
- ▶ “Social value” is a way of thinking about how scarce resources are allocated and used. It involves looking beyond the price of each individual contract and looking at what the collective benefit to a community is when a public body chooses to award a contract.

- ▶ Social value asks the question: 'If £1 is spent on the delivery of services, can that same £1 be used, to also produce a wider benefit to the community?'
- ▶ The Act will benefit deprived communities and small community groups by encouraging commissioners to consider overall value, including economic, environmental and social value when considering local service provision?
- ▶ Community groups can use a Social Value approach to provide a meaningful snapshot of their organisation that can be communicated to members and funders

The Foundation highlights the social value concept in the NHS on stakeholders across the North West and the impact the adoption of a social value philosophy has on peoples' lives and their well-being. The presentation eluded to social value as an organisational philosophy, similar for those of you familiar with the concept of cradle-to-cradle (further reading see McDonough and Braungart., 2002).

The presentation raised some interesting questions and discussions, summarised in the following table;

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How will small providers benefit from Social value act, when big businesses are sucking up 99% of large contracts?</i> • <i>How do we get these mechanisms (the philosophy of social value) into micro businesses so they can play with the big boys?</i> • <i>The challenge is for people to get to grips with what the commissioners want.</i> • <i>Good commissioners should expect Social Value from ALL providers – big or small.</i> • <i>Sometimes 'we' have to get on with it and ask for forgiveness later – rather than ask for commissioning guidance.</i> • <i>How do we move away from the tick box culture?</i> • <i>There is a concern that Social Value might just get added on to the end of the PQQ (i.e. becomes another tick box).</i> • <i>Commissioners may be desperate to not veer into 'tick box territory' but legal departments push them in a different direction (there are guidelines to follow, challenges from the economy etc.) – legal departments are very risk adverse - Risk and how it is managed is a big issue in social value.</i> • <i>The simple question is – what social value is associated to this contract? This makes people think about what social value is and what it is they do to create it.</i> • <i>Communities have got to say 'this is what we want'. People will buy services that fit with their social and local needs.</i> • <i>There are massive changes in the NHS – PCTs are controlling too much rather than supporting enterprise and letting it flourish.</i> |
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Table 4: Issues raised following first presentation

As seen here there are some concerns about the Act from the comments of some participants that felt the ways of working within public authorities could prohibit and obstruct the Act from creating the kind of impacts the North West Social Value Foundation showcases. One dimension of this was the opinion that current public authority engagement with micro/small enterprises was piecemeal and would require a shift of thinking in public authorities if micro/small enterprises were to be given the opportunities to deliver public services. Conversely, others felt that commissioners are more

aware than some think of engagement with micro/small providers. Other views expressed the need for public authorities to clarify their thinking and develop a better understanding of the needs of communities – and that communities should play a bigger role in defining needs and be given a voice. Concerns were raised about the current and continuing trend (even beyond the Act) of a tick box culture and that social value will be objectified and rationalised to the point that the good stories will be lost in the bureaucracy and control mechanisms of the institutions. Interestingly, the focus of one participant was not on the commissioners of services but on the legal departments and managing risk.

In terms of micro/small enterprises, size was recognised as a challenge, as to how they could fit within the shaping of the market – traditionally based on larger, more competitive players (competitive in the sense of able to compete through their ability to market themselves and spend time and resources on building/raising their profile with public authorities). The challenge of size was also a challenge of capability and capacity to engage, but not necessarily knowing what that engagement looked like. Similarly, of concern for micro/small enterprises was the mindset and administration systems that would be required to embrace a social value philosophy. Some participants took the view and stressed the importance for micro/small providers to ‘get inside the heads’ of commissioners, make themselves known and raise their heads above the parapets of their work. These comments could be associated with those that mentioned the necessity of micro/small providers to think more about clarifying and evidencing social value in the work they do – but quite how this could be done was less clear.

For the next part of the session we split participants up into groups where each discussed the theme of their table. After analysis of the discussions we grouped under two themes; (i) market shaping, below the radar (Table 5) and (ii) Capturing data and measurement tools (Table 6).

Discussion theme 1: Market shaping and below the radar

- What do we mean by below the radar? Who’s radar?
 - Micro-providers and small enterprises are certainly below Commissioners radars!
 - But micro-providers and small enterprises are not below the radar of others (communities, service users and in terms of personalisation Community Catalysts)
 - Isn’t a lot of personal care below the radar – something done by families, friends and communities that the government don’t see – or don’t want to acknowledge it is there as they’ll then have to start paying for it?
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- Commissioners may want to know about other providers and stimulate the market but it is hard to know how to engage them.
 - We [Council officer] want to get to know micro-enterprises but don’t know how to
 - We (Council officer) recognise we were slow with the concept of small organisations delivering services – but we are still not quite there with micro – providers/enterprises
 - Concerns that commissioners don’t want to know small providers – or that small enterprises don’t want commissioners to know about them – perceptions of the burden of extra paperwork, the bureaucracy, official registers, procurement processes and blocks to prevent them providing services as they do now.
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- Part of the problem is that social workers are so used to following older ways of working and will refer to service users to what and who they know.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issue of recognising that the structure is changing. • Service users loss of the state and the Local Authority safety net, feel vulnerable in the holes of the market
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Micro-enterprises are 'Sparks' – network of fixers, this is how <i>big</i> business works – people who know people, people who know what's going on • In many ways this is the ideal scenario – as it is about Personalisation pushing <i>up</i> from the user rather than <i>down</i> from commissioning. • Culture of enablement – just do it! • This informal system of networking needs to be out in the open and encouraged.

Table 5: Discussion theme 1: Market shaping and below the radar

In this discussion theme the notes highlight that the below the radar analogy is something that needs contextualising. Participants were quick to point out micro-enterprises are active community players and that the distance of commissioners from what is happening within communities is more of the issue as to why micro-enterprises are considered to be below the radar. Essentially, being below the commissioning radar, where the service user pays for their service is less problematic (in terms of the transaction). Only where the finances of the state intervene in the exchange does this become more of an issue. The situation begs the question of whether micro-enterprises need to raise their profile with commissioners? Or whether commissioners need to get to understand their communities better and build knowledge networks? – or somewhere between the two!

One issue that came to the fore in the discussions was that commissioners were slow to either build links with micro-enterprises or have tried and failed too. There was also a hesitation on behalf of micro-enterprises to correspond with commissioners. The differences in their agendas, purpose and ways of working were seen as being too dissimilar to bridge. Linked to this was also a judgement where micro-enterprises had removed themselves from engagement, either out of political ideology (not wanting to be part of making a political party's policies work) or out of the frustration of the system.

An interesting thread of discussion was around the current ways of working and the knowledge of social workers in the process of directing service users to service providers. As in many contexts who you know is considered a safer place to be than who you do not – especially when people are in positions where they make recommendations to others (service users). For this to change the system and influencers possibly need to change, and there was some admission that the sector needs to recognise the structure and ways of engagement are changing and that new ways of working need to come to the fore. Meanwhile, there was some acknowledgement that in this changing environment some service users felt vulnerable in finding their way to the right services for them in a nascent market that has not been as joined up or as smooth as hoped.

Filling the disconnected void, made in the previous point, participants felt micro-enterprises were the brokers of the gaps. Some participants recognised the entrepreneurial nature of these types of organisations in getting on with it – the bottom up approach in action. Yet others felt there could be more done to bridge the gap on behalf of commissioners in innovative steps to support the development of the market.

The second theme was capturing data and measurement tools, the following notes capture the essence of the discussion (Table 6).

<p>Capturing data and measurement tools</p>
<p>Collecting data</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can you measure well-being/social value? • Does Social Value need to be measured through forms, numbers and analysis? • Can it be done through video, case studies, personal experiences? • Micro enterprises wishing to collect data about social impact need to be educated along the lines of ‘what are we collecting’ ‘why are we collecting it’ and ‘ what feedback it will provide’ and received useful feedback about their data they would be more likely to engage with the data collection process.
<p>Indicators</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many micro providers deal with a variety of funding bodies, each wanting different measures of social value. • It was argued that the process of setting proxies/indicators at the beginning of their own data collection process is vital for micro enterprises. • If this is done carefully at the beginning it can save both time and money. • Many micro providers collect large amounts of data without going through a process of setting indicators and then have to engage in a time-consuming and expensive process of sorting it out (filtering what evidence and impact is useful). • This was likened to a conventional business taking a bag full of receipts to an accountant when the annual accounts are due. • However, it was noted that both proxy/indicator selection, and data collection in general, are impractical for many micro enterprises who have no training in these areas.
<p>Tools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Social value is considered by some as the cherry on top of the cake – it should be part of the recipe.’ • The aspirations and motivations of the providers (to engage in proving value) needs to be given consideration. • A ‘toolbox’ analogy was used to argue that there should be a set of core measures, that need different tools for different jobs – and that there are certain tools that are common to all toolboxes, such as a hammer and screw driver – and then some specialist tools. • Issue with the amount of tools and the way that they are being promoted with regulatory bodies etc. • Maybe it is about legitimacy of different tools (the simpler ones) – not just the scientific or the tick box ones. • Maybe it’s a case of trial and error – toolbox analogy – takes time to build up. • A toolkit ‘Valuing Social Value’ intended to help make sense of the many tools, frameworks and approaches to articulate and demonstrate social value is available at http://www.ncl.ac.uk/kite/research/project/3013 (Newcastle University Business School, in collaboration with North East Third Sector Organisations) • A form of added value that does get monitored is the NHS CQUIN (pronounced ‘sequin’) targets. They have an added cost – individually negotiated in the contract – and so get rigorously monitored.

- How small can the process be to be acceptable?
- Social Value can often been felt or seen rather than simply measured.
- Alternative methods of capturing this (videos, testimonials, case studies etc.) may be particularly useful for very small enterprises.

Table 6: Capturing data and measurement tools

In this discussion theme of capturing data and measurement tools, participants highlighted some of the challenges, that micro-enterprises require more knowledge and understanding – they need to be sold why it is important for them – as well as how they can go on and do it. In these comments it appears a given that someone is requesting this information – public authorities – and the task, it is implied, is something they both need to share ownership and responsibility for.

The discussion on indicators, surfaced similar dialogue about the co-ownership – and spending time in building knowledge and understanding of proxies, and their values – so that data collection can start on very clear grounds.

The discussion on tools, brought out in conversation the thoughts that more than one tool was necessary in the totality of evidencing added value. The analogy of a *toolbox* was mentioned by a few participants. However, participants were quick to point out that there was no clear sign of which particular tools were best to use and what resources (time and knowledge/skills) they require. It was noted that, in some instances, the ‘right’ tool for the job will be the one that is recognised by the funder. Often this is SROI or SAA. However, the application of such tools does not come without difficulty especially considering the resource restrictions of very small organisations.

It is with these complex issues in mind that we now turn to a case study presented to the focus group from Dave Wilson, Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council. Dave is part of the Joint Commissioning and Performance Management Team and spoke about a project they supported at The Wooden Canal Boat Society. This project highlights the issues of co-ownership of the data, complexity of measurement and the unease felt by some in attributing financial proxies to social impacts. A detailed case study has been submitted to the Social Enterprise Journal, for space in this paper we present a shortened version, yet allowing for the voice of the author (Dave Wilson) come through.

The Wooden Canal Boat Society (WCBS) was founded in 1986, becoming a Company Limited by Guarantee and Registered Charity soon after. The WCBS has considerable experience in the restoration, maintenance and running of wooden canal boats. Operating from moorings at the Portland Basin⁴, Ashton Under Lyne in the Metropolitan Borough of Tameside, Greater Manchester (a short journey from the very different world of the Etihad Stadium, home of MCFE, some 5 miles away) North West of England, the Society has the second largest collection of historic wooden canal boats in the country.

With upwards of a hundred volunteers working alongside a small team of paid staff, the Society runs a successful canal-based recycling scheme and charity shop. The WCBS has

⁴Portland Basin in Ashton-Under-Lyne, is a small independent marina based at the junction of the Lower Peak Forest, Huddersfield Narrow and Ashton canals.

*an ethos for the preservation of boats using traditional boat-building skills and documenting the industrial heritage and ways of life associated with the country's inland waterways. For some years now the WCBS has recognised the role that volunteering can play in enriching the lives of people recovering from mental health issues. In addition to learning new skills, volunteers actively contribute to the restoration and up-keep of historical boats, whilst many more, through staying on-board some of the Society's boats, have been introduced to the peaceful, often therapeutic way of life - characteristic of canal boat communities. Mindful of health and well-being outcomes some five or six years ago the Society began to develop plans to restore a 95 year old boat – **Hazel**.*

Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council's (TMBC) Joint Commissioning and Performance Management Team (JCPMT) first became aware of the nascent project towards the end of 2008.

The JCPMT are responsible for the Council's adult social care commissioning (along with some services commissioned in partnership with the PCT). With the majority of the Council's social care provision now externalised, the teams core business is the commissioning, tendering and performance management of contracted services. Although historically, this has tended to be high value, high risk 'block' contracts for supported accommodation, homecare and alike, the personalisation agenda was, by early 2009, starting to have an impact on our thinking and approach to commissioning. Tameside had, for twenty years or more, used market testing to provide a bed-rock of good quality, traditional services delivering value for money, but with a preponderance of larger, regional and national providers – which was somewhat to the detriment of smaller, local organisations. Indeed, there is a view that this is one of the main reasons why the Borough's Third Sector perhaps lacks the diversity and presence of some neighbouring boroughs. Mindful of this, through 2009 the JCPMT had a series of meetings with the WCBS to start shaping the project and to explore opportunities to widen it out to a range of disability groups and citizens. The Society had costed the restoration and fitting-out of Hazel at £128,000. The fact that Hazel was, at this point, little more than a 'template', partially submerged in Portland Basin was actually part of the projects appeal, to both WCBS and TMBC.

An initial briefing paper/proposal was submitted to Adult Services in February 2010 followed a revised proposal in June of the same year. Both were problematic in the sense that we struggled to demonstrate the wider social value of the project. On reflection, this was exacerbated by the fact that Adult Services would, in effect, be funding a non-social care provider; there was a certain 'leap of faith'. This was a sector we had no expertise or knowledge of; we did not know one end of a boat to the other, or indeed one end of a hammer to the other! Yet, as a commissioning team, we had spent time with the WCBS, getting 'under the skin' of the project, talking to members of the Society who had themselves benefited from spending time with the boats and the boating community and who had seen how becoming part of a valued community group could in turn, bring a sense of belonging, value and worth to others.

Our briefing papers failed in part, to communicate this and translate our 'gut feelings' about the added value of such a project in to a robust proposal with clear, demonstrable

outcomes. What we required was 'bottom line'; evidence on which to base a decision about releasing funding.

Locally, the SROI model had previously been piloted. At the Council our market development sub-group were keen to undertake a forecast SROI impact assessment by way of forming a clearer view on the pros and cons of the model. Three people – the WCBS's Business Development Officer, Fiona; T3SC's Support and Development Manager, Naomi and me – were identified to take on responsibility for the impact map.

Stage 1: boundary setting and impact mapping

From the outset, there were restrictions to the scope – and inevitably, the rigor - of the impact assessment. Foremost of these was a timescale that mitigated against anything other than cursory stakeholder engagement. That said, we were careful to undertake as comprehensive a scoping exercise as possible in terms of stakeholders – indeed upwards of thirty potential stakeholders were identified by Fiona. We pressed ahead with the impact assessment, and stories really began to enrich the data and our thinking about outcomes and indicators of change.

Setting the parameters for the SROI analyses was somewhat problematic. Essentially, our aim was to produce an impact map that demonstrated, with attendant monetary value/ratio, the social value we 'knew' would result from having a restored wooden canal boat available for use by a range of disabled and otherwise marginalised people and communities. A complicating factor however was that there were two distinct elements to the project; (1) the restoration of the boat and (2) its subsequent use. Council funding, if it was to be approved, was towards the capital costs of restoration. In terms of numbers of volunteers and people accessing the boat, the real benefits – the added social value – were likely to come once the boat was complete and operational. On top of that, we had to decide what timescale to evaluate it over. In the event, calculations regarding some of the outcomes on the final impact map varied in terms of the duration of the period they covered between either three years or five. Those calculated over three years took into account that the first eighteen months of the project would be focussed on the restoration of the boat; only after completion would people be able to use the boat for days/trips out, undertaking skippering and crewing qualifications etc at which point usage would increase significantly.

We tried throughout to make a distinction between 'volunteers' and 'boat users'. Whilst there may, in the eventuality, be occasions when volunteers are also boat users, for the purposes of calculating the SROI, it was assumed that they were two distinct groups; that boat users would not be volunteering their time in either the restoration, maintenance or running of the boat but would instead be taking trips on it by way of engaging in therapeutic and meaningful activity. At the time, this seemed significant to us. On reflection, it was problematic and arguably a somewhat artificial, unnecessary distinction.

Stage 2: collecting data

Again, of necessity given constraints on time, we decided to focus on only a handful of outcomes in taking the mapping exercise through to applying financial proxies and calculating values. We settled on four broad outcomes, acknowledging in the accompanying narrative that these could, under different circumstances, have been more specific and that they were only a selection of a number we could have taken through to the full impact map:

- Adult Social Care services will be used less, resulting in savings and efficiencies to the Adult Social Care budget.
- Primary Care Health services will be used less, resulting in savings and efficiencies to the PCT budget.
- Reduction in the number of people accessing specialist Mental Health Services
- Reduced GP Visits

In turn, each of these outcomes had indicators against which financial proxies could be placed.

Stage 3: modelling and calculating

All financial proxies used were taken from the Personal Social Services Research Unit (PSSRU) Unit Costs of Health and Social Care 2009 directory. Our feeling at the time was that they weren't entirely ideal, not least because of their London-centric bias. Indeed, one of the recommendations that came out of this piece of work was that we develop a bank of proxies based on Tameside figures. This stage was, in most other respects, 'rough and ready' to say the least. A number of assumptions were made. Key among them:

- 10% reduction across all those people who access the canal boat project reporting mental health issues in the number of them being referred through to specialist mental health services.
- A 5% reduction across all those people who access the canal boat project already care coordinated requiring that on-going involvement with specialist mental health services.
- A 10% reduction across the same cohort in the number of visits to their GP over the five year period.

Assumptions around the frequency and duration of mental health issues were limited in the sense that mental health was defined, where reported at all, by self reporting not by formal diagnosis. It's fair to say that the figures could just as easily have been lower or higher which would in turn have had some bearing on the financial ratio produced. Indeed, there was a certain amount of manipulating the figures as we went through. We wanted a final ratio that looked reasonable, realistic and balanced. We were conscious that an 'inflated' ratio might – certainly in terms of building a compelling case for funding the canal boat project – be counter-productive. Our understanding and knowledge at the time of the SROI model was rudimentary and to some extent this was reflected in our somewhat 'gung-ho' approach to the proxies and assumptions made around outcomes and indicators. We were, for example, slightly uncomfortable with the concept of 'monetising' social value; the ultimate aim of producing a financial value seemed to contradict some of the evidence it entailed in getting there – i.e. the non-monetary valuations by stakeholders of the value of the organisation/project.

The process also relied on some presumed causal relationships between action and impact that we found hard to sustain. For instance, a number of people reported periods of emotional and mental distress that, on occasions, resulted in self harm and periodic visits to A&E. Their subsequent involvement with the WCBS in a voluntary capacity coincided with extended periods of stability and, amongst other things, a reduction in self harming behaviour (and, hence, fewer presentations at A&E). Whilst anecdotally there was a link between the positives to be gained from a valued role as volunteer – improved self-esteem, self-confidence, meaningful activity and structure etc – this was problematic in terms of making working assumptions on which to base calculations. How often did people previously present at A&E? Over what period? What other factors – counselling, therapy, medication, relationships – might account for the reduction?

There was a real complexity to this stage, with the calculations and the formulas required to factor in deadweight, attribution and drop-off, and to pull all the data together. Indeed, the whole exercise did raise questions around proportionality. Fiona, for instance, was quite clear that, lacking the officer time and administrative support, the WCBS could not have undertaken the evaluation on their own.

Stage 4: reporting and embedding

From what was quite clearly a flawed, somewhat compromised impact assessment, we arrived at a final social value ratio just short of 1:4. Perhaps of more significance however, was the process that the three of us – the three organisations in effect – had gone through to arrive at this figure. The journey and opportunity to sit down together, to interrogate not only raw data but also the stories, the case-studies and anecdotal evidence was colossal. The impact map operated in some respects as a conduit, a framework to ‘translate’ people’s stories in to a shared language that others – in our case, Adult Services – could engage with and understand.

Without engaging the SROI Network to undertake a rigorous, independent evaluation of our impact map we were very aware that in many respects it would not stand up to close scrutiny. However, we were careful to acknowledge this in our narrative and to stress that in our view, the dialogue between the WCBS, T3SC and TMBC, was as significant, if not more so, than the final ratio. The act of consulting produced qualitative information and learning as well as a shared understanding of outcomes and social value. There was, we concluded, a certain degree of accountability inherent in this: by providing both numbers and the story to support those numbers, the SROI process makes the creation of social value (more) transparent. Despite the limitations of our attempt, the impact map proved to be the final piece of the jigsaw in terms of the WCBS business case; in November 2010, funding was approved on the back of the SROI.

As of July 2012, Hazel is in dry-dock, fully planked and on schedule for completion in spring 2013.

This example has been included to highlight the difficulties with evidencing social impact in a complex case. Although SROI was selected as the preferred evidencing tool, the technicalities of

creating the SROI ratio required the use of other less formal data gathering tools (such as checklists and interviews) alongside collaboration and co-ownership of the data. The process of evidencing impact became as important for those working with WCBS as the ratio required by the funders.

The discussion that followed picked up on the concluding comments, reiterating the earlier dialogue around the apprehensive approaches micro-enterprises have with measuring social value, summarised below:

The Social Value philosophy - Throughout the day, attendees kept coming back to the Social Value Act and discussed what impact it may have on commissioners, providers and users. There was a view that public sector resources should not be limited by departments or areas (or silos) but should simply be spent in the best way for society. It may be that the philosophy of social value may become an umbrella of a number of different things (health, government, public sector) - wherever there is a public offer. Caveat, any willing providers must demonstrate Social Value.

Measurement Tools - There was agreement that at present, some tools are trying to make something that is qualitative and longitudinal into something relatively quick, quantified and cross-section. This creates somewhat of a problem. There are formal tools to evaluate things and give legitimacy to outcomes. But additionally, there are initiatives or services that people can see or feel are working but are very hard to quantify. Perhaps the real challenge is to try and identify what it is that we see in these providers that we *feel* give impact.

There was a suggestion that the 'right' tool for the job should be strongly related to the service being offered and reflect the provider perceived impacts. This would enable individual providers to select the most appropriate tool (or tools) for their own organisation.

Furthering this discussion was the suggestion that there needs to be fluidity to be able to choose and use different tools. There is a suspicion that SROI may price itself out of the market, in terms of the resources required to implement the tool. There are likely to be other tools or approaches that emerge in the future. Closing down the options for providers is unlikely to be helpful when there is not currently any consensus about the 'right' way.

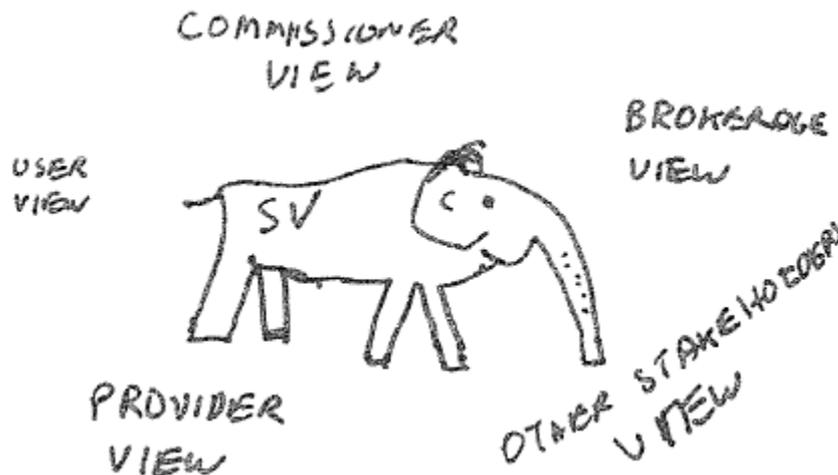
Conclusions

In conclusion we reflect on an informative focus group that provided a rich source of knowledge as expected from the expertise that was in the room. We openly admit we are no nearer to the *golden fleece* that is one best way to demonstrating impact for micro-enterprises. Yet we are richer in the knowledge the focus group provided a space to share similar challenges and issues with others, who are grappling with the same issues as ourselves in this period of chaos of change in public service and public service provider parameters.

As a methodology, we acknowledge the richness of the conversations that were going on during the focus group, capturing as much as we could between the team in terms of notes and post reflection meetings. However, we acknowledge the boundaries of this research – both in terms of the illusiveness of what conversations were lost between the lines and pages of notes, as well as the limited claims we can make of the findings beyond the opinions of the people within the focus group – or indeed beyond the opinions that were not universally agreed upon within the group.

The key points we conclude are:

- I. **One-size fits all won't work** – despite the need for measurement, it seems unlikely that one single tool will suit all uses. Whilst SROI has been highly marketed and promoted in some camps, others are likely to emerge and may come to the fore. To return to the analogy, the toolbox is likely to be the order of the day.
- II. **Big Unanswered Questions** – we are still left questioning what is it we're trying to measure, why and who for and when?
- III. **Changing Times and Roles** – Commissioners, NHS, brokers, social workers, providers, end users – as the roles change over time there needs to be flexibility in approaches and an acceptance that some of it will be trial and error.
- IV. **Changing Up** – perhaps the best approach for micro-enterprises is for them to capture/record their impact in whatever way they choose (video, cases or statistics).
- V. **The Social Value Act** – although now law and considered a good thing on the whole, it will be some time before the implications can be seen in practice.



The elephant in the room – The Social Value Act, somewhat overshadowed the discussion on measurement to a point. Yet essentially, if the sector and in particular micro/small enterprises are to begin to evidence their impact, then the Act as a philosophy and not the particular tool would appear to have won the debate here.

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