

JRF Programme Paper

Bradford

**WHAT MAKES EFFECTIVE PLACE-BASED WORKING?
LESSONS FROM JRF'S BRADFORD PROGRAMME**

Sharon Telfer

From research by Brightpurpose Consulting and Mandy Wilson Ltd.

August 2013

This paper:

- highlights what local stakeholders saw as the strengths of the programme;
- identifies what they felt could have worked better; and
- explores some of the challenges for organisations doing place-based work and what might help their planning.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) commissioned this paper as part of its programme of work in Bradford. JRF has made a ten-year commitment to partnership working in the city.

ISBN 978 1 85935 992 1
© Sharon Telfer 2013

Contents

Executive summary	3
1 Introduction	5
2 What worked	7
3 What were the strengths of JRF's approach?	9
4 What were the weaknesses?	11
5 What are the challenges for place-based working?	13
6 Conclusion	17

Executive summary

In 2004, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) made a ten-year commitment to work in Bradford, acting in partnership with others in the city. This programme is now drawing to a close. JRF has commissioned two independent reviews of the programme to find out what has – and hasn't – worked. Drawing on consultation with local stakeholders, the reviews highlight the challenges for other organisations considering 'place-based' approaches.

The findings indicate that JRF has worked best when creating the conditions for impact rather than having a direct impact on the city itself. Respondents pointed to JRF as:

- strengthening local partnerships;
- providing safe spaces for debate;
- acting as a critical friend;
- strengthening evidence;
- giving previously unheard groups a voice; and
- increasing understanding of local communities.

Respondents felt the strengths of JRF's approach came from its long-term commitment, clear impartiality, ability to approach difficult issues sensitively, reputation for reliable research, and employment of a dedicated local programme manager based in Bradford.

But few thought the programme had made a long-term impact. Many were still unsure of its purpose, eight years after it began. The research threw up some mixed messages, with no particular pattern in who said what and contradictions raised even within single projects.

Overall, however, there is some consensus that JRF should have:

- Been more strategic and clearer about the programme's purpose.
- Involved local stakeholders in the design of the programme and its projects.
- Translated more research into practical action.
- Worked with broader networks and partners.
- Communicated more, both throughout projects and in disseminating findings.
- Stuck with projects rather than moving on to new work.

The two reviews found JRF was most successful acting as an 'honest broker'. They recommend that its role, as the programme draws to a close, should become to facilitate, influence and enable partners to take action as a result of its research activities.

The disparate views expressed by respondents illustrate the complexity of place-based working. It may never be possible for organisations doing such

work to please everyone all the time. But organisations should be clear about what they see as the scope – and limits – of their intervention. The research suggests a number of questions organisations should think through when deciding what their role should be. These include the best way to staff programmes, how to communicate findings, and whether or not they are prepared to share ownership of the programme.

1 Introduction

Since 2004, JRF has run a partnership programme in Bradford. In 2012, it commissioned two independent reviews to look at what has worked – and what hasn't – in the programme so far. The findings are intended to inform the future direction of the Bradford programme and JRF's own internal ways of working. But they also offer pointers for those working in Bradford and for organisations planning similar 'place-based' approaches elsewhere.

JRF's Bradford programme

Based in York, JRF wanted to gain sharper insights into a range of social policy issues by extending its work into a city with greater diversity and deprivation. Bradford's economic and ethnic profile provided that contrast. Importantly, the local authority was open to a partnership approach.

JRF committed to a ten-year programme, and has allocated around £2.5 million so far. At first, projects focused on community cohesion and empowering communities. Other themes developed to reflect changing needs, including concerns for unheard groups and the impact of the recession. There was a dedicated Bradford Programme Manager from 2004–2013, working from a JRF office in Bradford.

The two reviews looked primarily at the projects funded through sub-programmes: Communities Bradford, Connecting through Change, Living through Change and Working in Neighbourhoods. Projects in Bradford have taken many different – often innovative – approaches, including film-making, drama, public lectures and debate, books, community research, action research, and awards to social entrepreneurs. Topics have included:

- showcasing the voices of people who are not usually heard;
- exploring the impact of recession on mental health, small businesses and enterprise, community relations, and household debt and livelihoods;
- supporting action-learning sets on working in neighbourhoods, and wider networking and events led by local individuals and organisations;
- investing in local people with ideas for tackling local issues (through the UnLtd and Bradford Council partnership on Social Futures Awards);
- co-funding (with the Association of West Yorkshire Authorities) the Made in West Yorkshire project about people's identities, lives, voices and experiences, and the delivery of cohesion and government Prevent programme across the region.

JRF continues to work in Bradford. Ongoing work includes the practical Neighbourhood Approaches to Loneliness programme (across four neighbourhoods in Bradford and York; this ends in November 2013 and is

being evaluated separately); the Comm-Uni-Ty pilot project (a project bringing academics and activists together); the Inter-Cultural Leadership School (investing in forty young people living in Bradford); and match-funding with Bradford Council to support work on creating a dementia-friendly Bradford. These projects were largely outside the scope of the reviews, but many stakeholders mentioned these later projects as positively addressing their earlier concerns with JRF's overall approach.

The reviews

In 2012, JRF commissioned two independent reviews assessing the Bradford programme from different perspectives.

Brightpurpose reviewed the impact of JRF's involvement in Bradford from a 'public value' perspective. The aim was to help JRF take stock of their effect to date and to inform the programme's future direction.

'Public value' is a framework for understanding the impact an organisation makes at the societal level. The reviewers spoke with a wide range of stakeholders who could provide a strategic, societal view rather than a narrow, single-issue perspective. This included:

- Local authority officers and elected members, MPs, police and criminal justice system officers, statutory funder/commissioners;
- Voluntary sector representatives and leadership bodies, religious leaders, community organisers and activists, other charities, foundations and trusts operating in the same policy areas as JRF;
- Business leaders, leaders within the education sector.

The review asked strategic questions about JRF's role and connections within the city, what contribution JRF had made to Bradford's development, and how any impact had been generated.

For **Mandy Wilson Ltd**, Mandy Wilson, Marilyn Taylor and Steve Skinner reviewed the work carried out so far. They assessed its impact on JRF itself, as well as on the city and communities of Bradford. Their report included:

- A review of programme documents and publications;
- 45 interviews and three focus groups (thirteen people in total) with respondents from JRF and Bradford agencies (public and voluntary and community sectors);
- a workshop to discuss initial findings.

2 What worked

A number of projects had clearly made a positive contribution to communities and the city. Interviewees pointed to JRF's work as:

- **Strengthening partnerships** within the city and across communities. Respondents believed JRF played a vital role in broadening relationships within an already strong leadership community. JRF was an 'honest broker', facilitating conversations that would not have happened otherwise. These enhanced relationships form a lasting legacy, helping partners co-operate on emerging issues.

"I see more people working together and being creative. JRF have played a part in this."

Stakeholder, charities sector

- **Providing safe spaces for debate.** Stakeholders spoke of past difficulties handling sensitive issues. JRF forums facilitated a safe environment for people to discuss research findings.
- **Acting as a critical friend.** Stakeholders described JRF's ability to present issues in a non-judgemental spirit of exploration. This helped partners explore issues honestly without retreating to entrenched positions.

"In Bradford, many people feel the need to conform. JRF don't. They ... don't beat around the bush; they're sensitive but frank."

Religious leader

- **Strengthening evidence.** Reliable local evidence from JRF research was hard to ignore and provided a robust foundation for making decisions and confronting challenges. However, there were no examples of findings leading directly to policy responses.

"It's given us an evidence base for what was anecdotal before."

Stakeholder, community sector

- **Giving previously unheard groups a voice.** Several respondents said JRF had reached those who had not been heard before. This included young men (see Box 1), white working-class communities (see Box 2) and Muslim women (see Box 3). This work challenged stereotypes, identifying common ground as well as differences between groups.

"We used the research to influence thinking about how we change our mindsets towards people."

Officer, public agency

- **Increasing understanding of local communities.** Respondents saw the place-based approach bringing the increased understanding that a long-term commitment to one city or district could provide.

Box 1: Work with young men

The research project ***Lessons from the West Bowling Youth Initiative: Then, now and the future*** (Santokh Singh Gill with the West Bowling Youth Initiative) was about, and with, an existing project to develop a range of ways of engaging young British Muslim Pakistani men. The project included a re-union event of past members and a 'mobile memories' project involving members photographing the area and using the displays to discuss identity. It also involved focus groups and interviews with members, the making of a short film, a cultural exchange visit from a US-based youth group and a youth festival involving over 600 young people.

For participants, the experience built understanding about research and its role. Recognising and celebrating the achievements helped build confidence and having their photos on display in Bradford city centre boosted morale. A distinctive element is that the research methods facilitated the insights, reflection and personal change which participants experienced. The research experience was itself part of the process of change.

3 What were the strengths of JRF's approach?

Respondents felt JRF's Bradford base, national connections and international reputation gave it a unique position. They identified as major strengths:

- The **length of JRF's commitment**. This sent a message – to the city and outside – that Bradford is worth investing in. The timeframe transcended political cycles and allowed JRF to develop good local connections.
- **Independence**. JRF's impartiality was raised time and again as an asset.
- JRF's **reputation for robust research**. JRF made findings easy to digest and consider (although this did not always mean people accepted or acted on them).
- An **ability to confront difficult issues sensitively**.
- A **Bradford base**. Recruiting a local programme manager, rather than 'parachuting' someone in, showed commitment to genuinely local work.
- **Working with communities**. Several praised JRF for supporting research involving local people directly and giving them new skills as community researchers.

However, not all these strengths are clear-cut (as the case study in Box 2, and Section 5 on challenges, show).

Box 2: *Participation and community on Bradford's traditionally white estates*

Through giving residents a voice, this project (led by Jenny Pearce and Elisabeth Jane Milne) wanted policy-makers to hear what it feels like to live on these estates. The project involved both academic and community researchers and paid and unpaid community-based practitioners. They ran focus groups, household surveys, a photo project and visits to other projects. The academics were good communicators; this greatly helped relationships with residents. The project produced a short brochure featuring residents' photos and commissioned a local theatre company to produce a play to disseminate findings, alongside more traditional research documents.

This project had many supporters and had a legacy beyond Bradford. It did have a positive influence locally. Hearing directly from those using their services changed the way the local housing association and police worked. But it also had its detractors. Some people really liked the brochures, others didn't. The play, in particular, polarised opinions. Some say they couldn't hear themselves: "It was damning and a lot of people felt hurt by it". Others describe it as "dynamic and useful".

4 What were the weaknesses?

Despite pointing to these successes, few thought the programme had made a long-term impact on Bradford (although many identified benefits to individuals). Indeed, many remained unsure of the programme's purpose. Why was this?

- **Lack of clarity and coherence.** Many felt that JRF had not been clear about its role. As one person asked: is JRF a research project (shedding light) or an agent for change (trying to bring solutions)? Many were not sure why JRF had chosen Bradford over other cities.

"I'm really not sure. I guess we're fairly close to York, and Bradford certainly offers something different."

Stakeholder, higher education

- The **absence of ideas for turning research into practical action.** This lack of follow-through was significant for stakeholders; most respondents saw action as the way to make a lasting difference. Some felt JRF research simply confirmed what they already knew. Others said that recommendations didn't take account of available resources.

"It sometimes feels like they are saying 'here is the problem, now someone else please deal with it'."

Council member

- **Lack of local ownership.** Despite JRF's attempts throughout the programme, many respondents still felt they had not been involved in the design of the programme or projects and were critical of this. The agenda was seen to come from JRF. Respondents wanted JRF to work in closer partnership and with a much wider range of agencies and communities, designing interventions to which everyone contributed and so had a stake in.
- **Unrealistic expectations.** The ten-year commitment was clearly seen as a strength by local stakeholders, but it also raised serious expectations of tangible change. With limited finance and staff resources, did JRF raise expectations it could not fulfil? Is even a ten-year programme long enough to achieve lasting impact?
- **Narrow networking.** Some respondents felt JRF was too reliant on people it knew and trusted, limiting networks to the 'usual suspects'. In particular, people wanted more representation from the grass-roots/community level and decision-makers in wider public services beyond the local authority, like the NHS.

"Maybe they can choose who they do and don't engage with. Is that the right way to work?"

Stakeholder, community and voluntary sector

- **Poor communication.** While praising the innovative use of media – plays, photographs, film – many felt these should have had wider impact. Stakeholders felt wider engagement could help translate findings into action. Others wanted more dissemination at a national level.
- **Ending projects too soon.** Some felt JRF was stuck in a traditional model of commissioning research, publishing findings and then moving on. Many felt projects ended with life still in them and that those involved were not helped to take things further.
- **Set ways of working.** Criticisms of JRF included ‘silo’ working in its programmes and functions, slow approval processes and not devoting enough senior staff time to important relationships with high status local stakeholders. Separate offices made it hard to embed the work of the Bradford programme into the majority of JRF’s work in York.

The programme’s innovative work with Muslim women (Box 3) illustrates some of these tensions.

Box 3: *Our Stories, Our Lives* – Muslim women’s voices

Many cited work with Muslim women as having real impact. Wahida Shaffi had innovative ideas about how to get Muslim women’s voices heard; coming across the Bradford programme, she applied for funding. She wanted to get Asian women involved through seminars, films and film skills training.

The *Our Lives* project became a ground-breaking initiative. A group of women collaborated with professional filmmakers as a way of exploring their identity, their lives and their communities. Wahida was keen that this should help women deal differently with the issues they faced and get their voices heard by a wider audience, including the general public, service providers and policy-makers. The film led to a book, involving an oral historian and a photographer, with the women helping to edit the content. The *Our Lives* project helped kickstart the Bradford Muslim Women’s Council, now the Muslim Women’s Council which is expanding nationally.

JRF took a risk when it initially agreed to fund the *Our Lives* project. There is a feeling, however, that JRF could have done more, particularly with dissemination.

5 What are the challenges for place-based working?

Looking at JRF's experience, what can other organisations/funders wanting to get the most from place-based approaches learn?

Both reviews highlighted a number of tensions in stakeholders' response to the programme. And it's clear that not all of these can be resolved. Bradford stakeholders expressed a wide range of different – sometimes conflicting – opinions about what JRF could or should do. The two review teams often received mixed messages – positive messages from some were matched by more critical comments from others. For example, some wanted JRF to do more research; others thought there had been enough research, and wanted more practical action. Some people wanted JRF to work more in partnerships, others felt JRF already worked too much with too narrow a range of people or partners. No strong pattern emerged in who said what, with contradictory responses surfacing even around single projects.

The biggest challenge for place-based working, then, is perhaps recognising this: **it will not be possible to do everything that everyone wants you to do.** Local stakeholders have a diverse range of local concerns and perspectives; what they then want from organisations doing place-based working will reflect this. But for most organisations, limited practical resources together with their own mix of strengths and priorities means satisfying everyone is just not possible.

Stakeholders did make practical proposals which, from their perspective, would have made the JRF programme more effective (see Box 4). While these provide interesting pointers, they may not be appropriate or achievable for all organisations. (From a JRF perspective, some of these are already part of JRF practice; some – especially on communicating findings – were adopted in the later stages in Bradford in response to difficult experiences; some were not felt appropriate; and some were not tried but could or should have been.) More generally, the reviews also raise a number of broader questions: reflecting on these might help JRF and other funders when planning a place-based programme in future.

Box 4: Stakeholders' suggestions for place-based working

- Discuss and agree the purpose, role, aims and rationale with local stakeholders.
- Hold regular stakeholder conferences to inform priorities and programme design, and maintain momentum.
- Establish a local cross-party and cross-sector forum with influence over commissioning and follow up.
- Ensure locally based staff have the authority to make partnership decisions.
- Produce a dissemination resource pack for all project leads.
- Incorporate funding for follow-on and dissemination into commissioning.
- Integrate assessment of dissemination and follow up into commissioning.

- Establish – and keep to – clearly agreed arrangements with key local bodies on early circulation of findings.
- Consider comparative studies elsewhere to lessen the spotlight on one place.

Lessons for place-based programmes

For JRF, the place-based approach of the Bradford programme has been a long learning process. JRF has adapted the programme's priorities to reflect changing external pressures. It has also examined its internal working in light of the demands of place-based working. JRF has tried hard to integrate the Bradford programme into its overall work and to ensure its success, revising principles, revisiting governance structures and analysing risk. Organisations undertaking place-based working for the first time may need to be prepared to adapt and learn in this way.

But the key thing JRF never properly settled, and so could never properly communicate to people and agencies in Bradford, was exactly what JRF saw as its own role. Stakeholders wanted to understand JRF's goals for its work in the city; what it hoped to achieve and how. Eight years into the programme, these were still unclear.

So, if there is one key lesson from both the reviews, it is this: **be clear about your aims and strategy**. Place-based working is complex, bringing contradictions and necessitating trade-offs. Reflecting on some of these issues at the start could help bring programmes into sharper focus.

What expectations might your programme raise?

JRF's reputation as a funder had led to unrealistic expectations at the very start.

“Early on it did hold big conferences with hundreds of people. But all that did was raise expectations that JRF would bring in loads of money. Everyone thought they could get a bit of it.”

Workshop participant

Similarly, JRF's ten-year timeframe and employment of a locally based programme manager were clearly viewed as strengths and as signalling substantial commitment. However, this raised correspondingly substantial expectations that have largely been disappointed.

JRF had limited resources to put into this project and was always clear that its investment in Bradford was not just about cash. Compared with national and local government funding programmes, JRF's investment is a small sum across ten years. Most respondents wanted JRF's intervention to be very much more focused and strategic. Clearer management of expectations from the outset, with a realistic reflection of staff capacity and financial resources, could have helped this.

What is the main role your organisation will play?

To the outside world JRF's role and purpose remained unclear throughout the programme. Respondents asked whether JRF was in Bradford to:

- shed light or act as an agent for change?
- drive change from the inside or from the outside?
- battle for communities?
- lead research or action?

At different points in the programme it appeared to be all of these things. That got in the way of achieving some of them well. Organisations may have to choose whether their role is an enabling one (where JRF has been most successful) or whether their objective is direct action. Clarity and communication are key.

Where will ownership of the programme lie?

Bradford stakeholders were keen to know how they could become involved in the programme and what opportunities there were for partnership working. Involving stakeholders centrally in development and design could help ensure follow-up and sustainability for the programme. But not all organisations will be able or willing to share ownership in this way. If not, ownership needs to be clear for all involved to avoid confusion. For those prepared to open up ownership, engaging the right partners both from the outset and throughout the lifetime of projects will be important. Spreading the net of partners widely is also likely to add to engagement with the programme and enhance its credibility – although building relationships with a bigger range of partners will require considerable investment of time. Some criticised JRF for working with too limited a network.

What is best way to staff the programme?

Finding the right staffing mix for a place-based programme is crucial. Where would staff be most effectively based? Local stakeholders welcomed the fact that JRF had a Bradford office base and programme manager, but this may have contributed to raised expectations about what JRF's role would be and what JRF could achieve. In addition, having a Bradford office was felt to make it harder to embed the Bradford programme into JRF's overall work. Another question raised through the reviews was: What decision-making powers should locally based staff have? Some suggested that this post needed more autonomy or that more senior staff should have had greater involvement.

What is clear from the reviews is that the dynamics of working with influential local individuals holding diverse views will always be a challenge in place-based working. Relationships need careful nurturing, especially with policy-makers and politicians. Influence depends on developing relationships so that attitudes and behaviours can be changed. One criticism of JRF was that its senior staff could not dedicate enough time to building relationships with high-level leaders in Bradford. This was further complicated by changes in both JRF senior staff and local stakeholders – unsurprisingly given the length of the programme.

What is the balance between trust and challenge?

The line between being perceived as critical friend or as *too* critical is a fine one. Managing this is crucial. JRF's independent voice was clearly its strongest asset, especially when coupled with its ability to raise difficult or contentious issues sensitively, and to speak from an evidence base. Organisations considering place-based programmes may need to consider how they can negotiate this difficult balancing act. Being a critical friend was felt to be easier said than done.

How will you communicate findings?

Given JRF's reputation for dissemination, it's perhaps surprising that many respondents criticised this aspect of the programme. Some suggested that JRF's expertise was based on the national policy arena; a place-based programme needed something different. Some said JRF did not seem prepared for the angry reception to some of its more critical findings, or alert to local (political or other) sensitivities.

Retaining trust requires clear agreements about what will be shared before wider dissemination. In place-based work, putting out findings often requires careful negotiation. Some Bradford respondents felt they could have helped with this: for example, there was an agreement that council officers would see reports first, so they could brief councillors, but this does not appear to have happened as routinely or as extensively as some respondents expected. Others, like the *Our Lives Project* (see Box 3), felt more creative approaches to dissemination could have brought wider, longer-lasting impact.

Organisations should consider whether they need to adapt their current ways of communicating to accommodate the sensitivities of place-based working. What agreements will you make about disseminating results? How will you handle messages that may be critical of local stakeholders and which can feel very close to home? How will you set recommendations realistically within current local resources and priorities?

What is the right length for the programme?

Given the lack of clear impact, there is a question mark about whether even the ten years of the JRF programme was long enough. More focused objectives from the start may have helped here. However long the commitment, it's important to think carefully about how programmes will end.

6 Conclusion

For JRF, the reviews conclude that it has been most successful acting as an honest broker. This meant:

- Strengthening partnerships, which led to better collaboration and debate about important issues.
- Providing safe spaces that fostered critical thinking.
- Providing reliable, local evidence that encouraged partners to confront challenging issues, and gave them a robust foundation for decisions.

As the Bradford programme moves into its final stages, the reviews recommend that JRF's role should become that of an organisation whose activities enables partners to take action.

The ongoing confusion about the programme's purpose, and the lack of definable impact, suggest it is crucial to create the conditions where research moves into practical action. As one community leader said:

“There's a pressing need for action. We don't have another ten years; the next three years are critical.”

Organisations will need to decide whether they have the capacity to undertake direct action themselves or are better placed to act as enablers.

For any organisation embarking on place-based working, being clear about the programme's purpose – both with partners and internally – is clearly a main ingredient for success.

About the authors

Sharon Telfer is a freelance writer and editor, specialising in social policy.

The review team from **Brightpurpose Consulting** was Helen Highley, Derek Ewens and Laura McLarty.

The review team from **Mandy Wilson Ltd** was Mandy Wilson, Steve Skinner and Marilyn Taylor.

This paper was commissioned as part of JRF's programme on Bradford, JRF has made a ten-year commitment to partnership working in the city.
<http://www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/bradford-programme>

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has funded this research paper as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy-makers, practitioners and service users. The facts presented and views expressed in this paper are, however, those of the author and not necessarily those of JRF.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead
40 Water End
York YO30 6WP
www.jrf.org.uk

This paper, or any other JRF publication, can be downloaded free from the JRF website (www.jrf.org.uk/publications/).

© Sharon Telfer 2013

First published 2013 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation
All rights reserved. Reproduction of this report by photocopying or electronic means for non-commercial purposes is permitted. Otherwise, no part of this report may be reproduced, adapted, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise without the prior written permission of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

ISBN: 978 1 85935 992 1 (pdf)

Ref: 2926

Contact:
Emma Stone
emma.stone@jrf.org.uk