Soft spaces and soft outcomes: experiences from City Strategy on local partnership working and measures of success

Abstract

This article uses the concepts of 'soft spaces' and 'soft outcomes' previously developed in relation to the study of local economic development and planning and applies them to the related, but not identical, field of localised welfare-to-work initiatives. The specific example of the City Strategy initiative in Great Britain provides evidence of these concepts in action. This initiative foregrounded the importance of local partnership working whereby various stakeholders joined together to operate in soft space to achieve commonly agreed goals. The article considers how local partnerships operate in soft space and the appropriate measures of success to be used when assessing the efficacy of their interventions. It is argued that both 'soft outcomes' and 'hard outcomes' can be used to understand success; but that assessment of soft spaces only in terms of 'hard outcomes' is far from comprehensive.

Introduction

In this article an assessment of the utility of the concepts of 'soft spaces' and 'soft outcomes' when applied to welfare-to-work policies is presented. Soft spaces are conceptualised as areas below national administrative structures which are not formally defined by legislative powers; rather sub-national actors operating in these areas come together voluntarily to address agreed policy objectives (Haughton and Allmendinger 2008). This is made possible by the nation state withdrawing from areas of policy intervention at national level and effecting contracting and procurement arrangements for services which facilitate and promote greater local voice in determining provision. National policymakers therefore no longer determine, but rather shape, policy at local levels. The result is a fragmented policy landscape in which different policy decisions are taken at different levels (Keating 2014), with tensions evident between and within these different levels. Governance of soft space is characterised by challenge, accommodation and compromise. The processes by which soft spaces emerge are consistent with the extension of neoliberal ideas into the sphere of interventions designed to get people back to work (see Jessop 2003; Peck 2007). Thus this article is located in terms of the broader literature on welfare state reform and governance of local partnership arrangements (Davies 2005; Atkinson 2010; Meegan et al. 2014).

'Soft outcomes' refers to one method of evaluating activity in soft spaces. Specifically soft outcomes are those that cannot be easily measured directly or tangibly; rather they may relate to enhanced awareness, organisational and attitudinal skills and/or practices – and so may be as much about the 'journey' as the 'destination' *per se*. Soft outcomes have been utilised previously in welfare-to-work initiatives to measure individuals' progress towards and in the labour market (Dewson et al. 2000; Hall Aitken 2011). It is argued here that they can be used

to examine issues of partnership working. In the case of welfare-to-work initiatives more generally, soft outcomes can mean raising awareness of welfare-to-work issues, new ways of working, working across policy domains and learning about why certain interventions worked, and not just whether they did or not. Arguably this interpretation is narrower than the one suggested by Haughton and Allmendinger (2008), which implies a link between local economic development's broad remit to improve quality of life and the types of outcomes which they propose. Some of these concerns may too be applicable in the welfare-to-work arena, but for reasons of space, the focus here is on individuals' employment journeys and partnership working.

The article shows how soft spaces and soft outcomes can illustrate and capture issues and achievements which may be missed by 'harder' methods of assessment and evaluation; in this case the examples relate specifically to process and learning. A concern with soft outcomes also implies a wider conceptualisation of welfare-to-work, and broader awareness can feed in to improving efficacy for other interventions in employment and other policy domains. Learning is one key area in which soft outcomes can advance understanding, and the method of evaluation can affect the approach taken by programme providers. In contrast to a hard outcomes evaluation approach which, in the sphere of welfare-to-work, can promote short-term decision making, a soft outcomes framework can also lead to a longer-term focus. Given the history of worklessness in many of the spaces which are subject to area-focused interventions, this approach has a greater degree of authenticity to one which emphasises a quick turnaround in fortunes. By examining these issues this article advances understanding of what measures of success are most appropriate when evaluating local policy interventions in the welfare-to-work arena, and in what circumstances.

The concepts of soft spaces and soft outcomes are exemplified here using the City Strategy (CS) initiative; a welfare-to-work initiative designed to reduce worklessness in areas where it was stubbornly persistent. Conceived at a time of relative economic buoyancy in the national economy albeit operational mainly in recessionary conditions, the CS initiative functioned in fifteen City Strategy Pathfinder (CSP) areas across Great Britain between 2007 and 2011. CS was partially an experiment in local partnership working (Green et al 2010, Green and Adam 2011), and was an initiative operating within soft space. Local partnership working need not always take place in soft space but did so in the case of the CS.

The way in which activity in soft space is evaluated is of relevance theoretically, in terms of both the wider study of neoliberal processes affecting back-to-work support and how this then interacts with debates about forms of local governance. CS lies midway along Atkinson's (2010) continuum from centralisation to localisation of employment initiatives in terms of devolution to local level of budgets and other responsibilities. Soft space is also of relevance from a policy viewpoint given the drive to greater localisation within welfare-to-work, which itself results from pursuing a broadly neoliberal approach. This suggests that local partnership working and working across fuzzy boundaries is likely to remain an important feature of the policy landscape for some time. If considering these arrangements through the lens of 'soft spaces' and 'soft outcomes' can be shown to have utility, then the applicability could be long-lasting. Yet at a time of reductions in public spending (HM Treasury 2010), there is a contrary trend emerging, emphasising the primacy of 'hard' outcomes and assessment of the value for money of local policy interventions (see Greenberg et al. 2011; Fujiwara 2010). Evidence is presented to challenge the rationale and assumptions behind this shift. There is a danger that insights from consideration of 'soft spaces' and 'soft outcomes' may be lost in a wider context of austerity. Moreover it is argued that evaluation

of performance in terms solely of hard outcomes is incompatible with a locally delivered policy framework operating in soft space. Indeed, the processes which result in creation of soft spaces are part of the same rhetoric which promotes types of evaluation activities which are insufficient to assess the operation of soft spaces. Of central relevance here is the increasing role of the market in the provision of services (Hood and Dixon 2015), through quasi-markets established by central government via selective lending of powers to bodies (statutory and non-statutory) and partnerships of various constituent members operating at different geographical scales.

The article draws on primary evidence collected during by the national evaluation of the CS initiative. In-depth semi-structured interviews and surveys on specific topics pertinent to the operation of the CS initiative were conducted with the fifteen CSP lead contacts with responsibility for local partnership co-ordination and other partnership members at regular intervals throughout the lifetime of the initiative. Primarily, this article utilises in-depth interviews with the CSP leads focusing first on alignment and pooling of funding, and a second round of interviews on aspects of partnership working (including engagement, additional value, impact, innovation, integration and influence) supplemented by 76 electronic survey responses from CSP partner organisations (including local authorities, Jobcentre Plus, health authorities, education/training providers, the third sector, employers/employers' organisations, etc.), in the context of findings from other rounds of interviews/surveys. These interviews and survey responses are used to draw out and provide examples of the issues related to working in partnership such as working within and across different geographical scales, working across policy domains at a sub-national level, and negotiating freedoms and flexibilities as well as handling ongoing relationships with central

government. CS is an appropriate example because both 'hard' and 'soft outcomes' were considered in the national evaluation of the initiative.

The remainder of the article is organised as follows. First, the context is outlined in more detail, drawing on the literature on the concepts of soft spaces and soft outcomes, and then setting out some of the key features of CS and the situation of the initiative in relation to the soft space concept. Secondly, the focus shifts to the practice of local partnership working in soft space, with particular consideration of the relationships which CS partnerships were required to mediate in order to operate successfully within soft space – both vertically with agencies operating at larger geographical levels and horizontally amongst partners and across policy domain boundaries at local level. Thirdly, the way in which the CS initiative was evaluated is explored and the targets which were implemented are outlined. Fourthly, the implications of measurement of success of welfare-to-work programmes operating in soft spaces in terms of hard and soft outcomes, and how each of these may be used and in which circumstances, is discussed. The implications of how measures of success interact with behaviour are also considered. Finally, the conclusion highlights how the recent drive for value for money and payment by results in British welfare-to-work policy relegates the importance of soft outcomes, and assesses the effects this may have in terms of behaviour and for learning opportunities within welfare-to-work programmes at local level. This move towards outcome-based payment models embodies elements of the new public governance approach (Lindsay et al 2014) and is categorised by targets and categorisation of claimants and was in evidence prior to the economic crisis. However the effect of the change in economic circumstances has accelerated and deepened the pre-existing trend, and in this context the challenge of showing the merits of an evaluation approach incorporating soft outcomes is more difficult.

Context

Background to ideas of soft spaces and soft outcomes

The idea of soft spaces was developed by Haughton and Allmendinger (2008) and Allmendinger and Haughton (2009), to advance understanding of the processes at work in relation to the governance of local economic development. Soft spaces exist in gaps between formal statutory scales of government (Haughton et al 2013) and are thus defined in relation to formal governance arrangements. They are what the formal is not. Walsh et al (2012) ask whether soft spaces are themselves new, or a new way to understand spatial governance with flexible boundaries. Similarly Haughton et al (2013: 221) raise questions about whether soft spaces are a continuation of longer standing trends or whether they are a new and necessarily neoliberal form of spatial governance, concluding that 'soft spaces' are "distinctive, new and still evolving" and represent a fundamentally different form of political decision making process. The conclusion here is that the soft spaces which have emerged are the result of neo-liberal processes involving recasting of notions of the state; it is not argued that all sub-national spaces are fashioned in this way.

The extension of neoliberal ideas in the field of welfare-to-work from the Thatcher and Major Conservative Governments of the 1980s and 1990s, through the years of the new Labour Governments is well-known (Jessop 2003). Over time the role of the market has gradually increased and been operationalized in different ways, though one common thread is the desire for a reductions in the cost, size and role of government (Allmendinger et al 2015), and although the rationales given by DWP for CS were numerous (Green and Adam, 2011), one

element was a desire to reduce duplication and waste in the bureaucracy. Soft spaces emerge through the types of political decisions which are embodied in the example of the CS initiative. For some (e.g. Crighton et al. 2009) this represents an extension of the role of the market in the welfare-to-work policy domain, through a commissioning strategy which favours larger for profit organisations over smaller not for profit organisations. In so far as neoliberalism implies a rescaling of state activity in local and national contexts (Peck and Tickell 2002) then CS can clearly be seen in those terms, even if the prominence of the market is in a somewhat diluted form compared with what has come subsequently through the Work Programme, where elements of competition between providers are stronger and more explicit.

A number of actors with responsibility and authority for different policy domains and operation of services operate in soft spaces. The study of interactions within these soft spaces, and of governance of soft spaces, is of interest given contemporary policy emphasis on localism. As noted by Madanipour and Davoudi (2015), localism means different things in different domains (i.e. spatial, political, social, etc.). They argue that "localism lies at an institutional-territorial-representational nexus with its own contested and continually changing ontologies, identities and boundaries. This nexus is formed by the different territorial and institutional arrangements that shape localities and by a continually shifting intersection of different perspectives and interpretations about the specificity and autonomy of a locality" (Madanipour and Davoudi, 2015: 11). From a spatial perspective localism often refers to smaller geographical scales (i.e. the neighbourhood/local area/city-region as opposed to the national scale). Arguments for localism in the welfare-to-work arena are not new: in his report on reform of Social Insurance and Allied Services, Beveridge (1942: 67) made clear that the administration of the Ministry of Social Security should be decentralised,

so that local officers "are in intimate touch with the problems and circumstances in their localities"; the idea was that local administration should be by local officials of a central department, in order to preserve local knowledge. The idea of 'soft spaces' draws primarily on spatial and political conceptualisations of localism, and are specifically neoliberal in terms of the transfer of some the state's powers, activities and responsibilities downwards and sideways to a range of local actors (from the public, private and third sectors).   As noted above, Atkinson (2010) has developed a centralised/localised framework to aid understanding of employment initiatives. So the question is not so much whether this welfare-to-work programme is centralised or localised, but the degree to which it is to one end of the scale or the other and also the nature of the powers and responsibilities which have been transferred. The state at a national level retains the power to determine the extent to which powers are transferred. The role of the nation state is developed further below.

The main focus of the discussion here is the question of how to evaluate activity in soft space. Concern with soft outcomes developed as alternatives to evaluation methodology based upon hard(er) outcomes.   The pre-dominant approach had previously been to see if policies delivered specific outcomes within a particular geographical area, and Haughton and Allmendinger (2008) concede that this approach is appropriate in certain circumstances, but note that: "…everything is wrong with it when we begin to acknowledge that changed practices are situated in tangled webs of governance involving feedbacks that work across a variety of geographies, sectoral boundaries and timescales, and not through readily measured direct and indirect impacts" (Haughton and Allmendinger 2008: 142). The links with a sub national approach to issues of economic performance are clear: "...the role of government is no longer to 'do' economic development. Rather it has become part of the role of government to encourage a multiplicity of sub-national governance structures through which

visions, strategies, funding and delivery responsibilities can be agreed, shared and, hopefully, carried out" (Haughton and Allmendinger 2008: 139).

The approach which Haughton and Allmendinger (2008) identify operating in the field of local economic development is replicated in the domain of welfare-to-work. Under the banner of activation (Walker and Wiseman 2003; Ingold and Etherington 2013) welfare-to-work's reach has extended to groups which had previously had little or no obligation placed upon them to seek or prepare for employment, and policy actors include public, private and voluntary sector organisations. This extension of benefit conditionality has meant that more individuals and policy domains have come within the ambit of welfare-to-work interventions, so increasing the number and range of policy actors involved with statutory bodies (including local government), the voluntary sector and the private sector coming together in inter-organisational collaborative partnership relationships (Rees et al. 2012). In turn this requires partnership procedures and governance norms to be established. The function of policy is changing and this interacts with the role of the nation state – the respective roles of nation state and policy are in constant flux and play off one another: "...the 'hollowing out of the nation state' idea rests on the notion of states 'lending' powers selectively up and down to other scales of governance, and horizontally, to new actors, such as business and community interests. But this reworking and rescaling of responsibilities across the tiers of governance does not imply a loss of power to the nation state, which retains control through its strategic selectivity in who it lends power to, on what terms, and how it chooses to redraw and redefine its distribution of powers over time" (Haughton and Allmendinger 2008: 140-1). This process is evident in the welfare-to-work sphere whereby the state has stepped back from directly delivering some employment programmes and by lending powers has placed responsibility with local partnerships as with the CS initiative, yet at the same time has

retained control as evidenced by tensions between the central and local levels of governance. Partnerships' tested the boundaries of their responsibilities through a series of 'asks' and 'requests' for flexibilities which they made of DWP (Adam and Green 2012), but in which they were often disappointed (Crighton et al 2009).

The types of soft outcomes identified by Haughton and Allmendinger (2008) relating to local economic development include such examples as feelings of safety and confidence in an area, political engagement and social capital, which can be measured by satisfaction surveys or by appropriate proxy indicators. In relation to welfare-to-work, there are various measures which could be thought of as soft outcomes and they fall into two broad categories. Outcomes may relate first, to the operation of the partnership with responsibility for delivering welfare-to-work services; and secondly to the individuals who have received support and guidance from partners in moving from worklessness towards employment. For the former, outcomes might be better knowledge within the partnership of the welfare-to-work landscape (information and intelligence on local initiatives), of what other partners are trying to achieve and how (through circulation and exchange of reports and evaluations), better signposting and referral systems between partners (through maintenance of common client management systems and directories of services), more streamlined supply chains with less duplication of provision (via partnership level planning and co-ordination), different ways of commissioning services (joint commissioning), etc. Soft outcomes relating to individuals might include measures of distance travelled, including improved confidence, improved self-efficacy, etc. (Dewson et al 2000; Hall Aitken 2011; McNeil 2012). Data on soft outcomes can be collected by a range of methods. The examples cited below use material from semi-structured interviews with partnership leads and surveys of key partnership members, as outlined above.

While the terms 'hard' and 'soft' may imply that there is a hierarchy of esteem, this is not the correct inference to draw, and it is not the argument which is made here. There should be no interpretation about the comparative robustness of the different types of outcome measures; what differentiates them is that they serve different purposes and the case is made that both are valid. Hard outcomes can be used to make judgements of successful impact, whereas soft outcomes can be used as a basis for learning in order to improve service delivery. The CS example highlights that hard outcomes are not always the most appropriate measure; rather it is suggested that the two types of outcome can be used to produce a more complete understanding of a policy intervention.

Background to CS

CS was a welfare-to-work initiative which operated in fifteen CSP areas across Great Britain from April 2007 in areas with high aggregate levels and/or concentrated pockets of worklessness. The underlying rationale was that generally good economic conditions across the British economy as a whole had not been shared equally and pockets of entrenched worklessness were evident in some urban areas (DWP, 2006). The Department for Work and Pensions (the central government department responsible for the formulation of welfare-to-work policies in Britain) encouraged and facilitated the formation of these partnerships to operate in this sub-national space, through providing the parameters of the initiative and practically by establishing some seedcorn funding. Further detail of the initiative can be found in evaluation reports (Green et al 2010, Green and Adam 2011), but some key contextual information is highlighted here. Initially commissioned to run for two years, the CS initiative was subsequently extended to run for four.

The initiative was designed to be 'bottom-up' in ethos, based on the assumption that the particular causes (and therefore solutions) were local in character and required local actors to develop solutions to improve economic performance through focusing on skills, employment and health. DWP encouraged the formation of partnerships at local level between relevant key stakeholders, such as local authorities, local delivery arms of national welfare-to-work policies, health services, housing services, the voluntary sector, employers and employer groups, to take on the role of co-ordinating the various welfare-to-work activities in the partnership areas. Thus the fifteen CSPs operated within the soft sub-national space hollowed out by arrangements made at the national level. CSPs were intended to align with functional economic geographies, though the extent to which this was achieved is contestable, reflecting that the 'building blocks' of the partnerships were local authority administrative areas. Partnerships were mainly composed of public sector bodies; in only one of the fifteen partnerships was the lead body not from the public or third sector. Nevertheless there were differences between CSPs in the approaches adopted – in terms of geographical focus (e.g. whether or not specific neighbourhoods were targeted), types of initiatives and sub-groups emphasised, and the degree of emphasis placed on establishing a clear infrastructure for promoting quality of service by employability delivery organisations.

CS was seen as part of an overall strategy to achieve an employment rate of 80% of the working age population (The Work and Pensions Committee, 2007). It was recognised that to achieve this, employment rates among certain client groups and in certain geographical areas which showed lower employment levels would have to increase. So, at one level CS was about getting people back into work, but it was also concerned with how this local approach might be an appropriate model for provision of welfare-to-work services for certain

client groups. Hence there was interest too in the partnerships' methods of operating. Within partnerships, opinions varied and changed in response to the external context (including political debates and the economic picture), as to the balance of primary interest between hard outcomes – what were often referred to by interviewees simply as 'the numbers' - and the way in which localisation worked in practice through the partnerships (Green et al, 2010; Green and Adam, 2011).

With regard to the latter, CS was based on a collaborative approach between key stakeholders. Partnership working was not a new approach with CS, but one which had been developed with some intent throughout the time of the UK Labour Government from 1997. Research into sub-national partnership working has addressed challenges of working at different spatial scales (North et al. 2009, Green and Orton 2010), tensions between central and local actors (Crighton et al 2009, Adam and Green 2012), integrating different policy agendas (North et al 2009) and the operation of public-private partnerships (Syrett and Bertotti 2012). All of these issues were pertinent to the CS partnerships which, in order to be able to make and implement decisions at the most appropriate level (Purnell 2008), had to continually renegotiate their territorial relationships outwards (especially to national and regional levels) and internally among constituent partners, all of whom had their own plans and partnerships (Haughton and Allmendinger 2009).

CS differed in its organisation from previous initiatives, such as the New Deals which focused on specific sub-groups (such as long-term unemployed adults, lone parents, etc.) (Jarvis, 1997; DWP, 2008) by taking a more holistic approach. The notion of 'worklesseness' was widened to include issues such as health and homelessness not traditionally thought of as directly relevant to getting people back to work. However, in

terms of the ethos, the language of recasting the balance between rights and responsibilities and the imposition of a greater imperative to seek work, CS represented continuity with previous interventions. The guiding hand of Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the central government department responsible for welfare policy, was evident in the allocation of seedcorn money to CSPs, the development of a learning network to share knowledge of successes and challenges, and through the formulation of business plans which required DWP approval. Partnerships had ongoing access to DWP officials and also had strong links with local government. Though the DWP retained overall strategic control, operational decisions were devolved to local partnerships, so foreshadowed the operation of some successor initiatives. CS went further than previous interventions, extending the coverage to sub-groups which had up until that point not been mandated to undergo work preparation activities as part of their 'benefit contract'. Thus CS looked at the disadvantaged in broad terms. The public employment service, Jobcentre Plus (JCP), retained operational responsibility for unemployed claimants, but in terms of governance arrangements, the district level JCP was a strategic partner in local partnerships. In some instances, JCP was a supportive strategic partner, and in other instances there were tensions; the relationships between CS partnerships and JCP were heavily influenced by the attitudes of individual officials. These could vary between those in strategic positions and those in operational roles, and could change over time depending on context, such as economic circumstances and/or new organisational targets.

The next section examines how the CSP local partnerships operated in practice and specifically how relationships were negotiated at various levels. Consideration is given to how partnerships negotiated the relationship with central government, but greater emphasis is given to the intra-partnership relationships; how partners sought to work together towards

common goals and the benefits and challenges of this approach for both the partnership and the individual partners. By doing so, the paper illustrates challenges and opportunities of working within 'soft space' and raises questions about how success can be measured for these activities.

CS partnerships in practice – operating in soft spaces

Overview

Part of the role of the CSPs was to bring relevant partners together to co-ordinate a joint approach to welfare-to-work locally. CS was not an intervention in the traditional sense where a body or bodies are charged with implementing a particular service or intervention. Instead it was about taking stock of the fragmented landscape, the organisations which operated within that landscape, the different funding pots available to the actors operating therein and trying to streamline and co-ordinate that provision to best advantage for clients. Partnership partly rests on the idea that numerous agencies (state and quasi-state) operate in the welfare-to-work arena at a range of spatial scales and with different responsibilities and expertise. There needed to be some way of coordinating these efforts.

Resources were available to the partnerships to tackle worklessness through existing funding sources over which local partnerships assumed control of allocation. These resources were to be deployed to plug gaps in provision. CSPs, through their local knowledge, identified the particular priorities which required their attention. This was often done through local area analysis of both profiles of out-of-work benefit claimants and of the welfare-to-work provision already on offer. Issues CSPs sought to address included a lack of co-ordination in

planning and provision of services, a confused landscape for benefit claimants, providers and employers with multiple points of contact or entry, and lack of effective systems of referral between providers.

CSPs were able to adapt and react to the changing circumstances which they encountered through the lifetime of CS by taking advantage of new opportunities, such as new forms of funding, and/or by responding to perceived weaknesses in the partnership approach. The issue of responsiveness of local partnerships is illustrated in two senses: first there is the ability to respond to new opportunities, and secondly there is the ability to reshape and remove provision if it is felt not to be working or alternatively expand more successful provision by area, client group or scale. Such issues outlined relating to changes in relationships and behaviour within partnerships are the types of issues which are amenable to consideration through a soft outcome lens and cannot be assessed in terms of hard outcomes. For example, successful partnership cooperation cannot be assessed in terms of overall reductions in numbers of out-of-work benefit claimants. There are numerous possible reasons why such reductions might occur, only one of which relates to the activities of CSPs.

The following sub-sections introduce the dimensions of partnerships' negotiations – vertically and horizontally. Vertical coordination revolves mainly around negotiation with DWP regarding freedoms and flexibilities in the approach that they could adopt to tackling worklessness, and horizontal coordination across partnerships refers to issues of agreeing priorities, aligning and pooling funding and working towards shared objectives. These negotiations get to the core of the challenges and opportunities of working within 'soft space' and highlight the importance of negotiation and compromise.

Relationships with central government (vertical coordination)

The relationships which CSPs experienced with central government are important to understand as they determine the nature of the soft space and the parameters within which the partnerships were able to operate. This relates both to the way in which partnerships were asked to consider the nature of the issues to be tackled and also to the way in which central government set up CS outcome measures mainly in terms of hard outcomes (as discussed in the next section).

The tensions around the levels of determination granted to CSPs (i.e. freedoms and flexibilities, and associated constraints) are discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Crighton et al 2009, Adam and Green 2012) and have implications around how CSPs conceptualised and imagined notions of success. Powers relating to control of budgets and operational delivery of welfare-to-work initiatives were granted 'down' to the local partnership level. CSPs took control over some existing resources and had some initial 'seedcorn' money to establish themselves. They were able to raise funding through other sources available to them, such as European funding streams. However, the 'rules of the game' (Jessop 2000) were set, at arms-length, at the national level, so partnerships had to operate within national rules. For example, partnerships had hoped to have some freedom in how they applied rules related to the operation of the benefits system (Green et al 2010), but this freedom was not forthcoming. Also set at national level were 'national targets' against which the partnerships would be measured: challenging targets relating to employment rates and decreases in benefit counts were set to drive up performance and encourage innovation. CSPs were made accountable for the targets, in the sense that these targets were set out as measures by which the CSPs' performance would be judged. CSPs had the tools and resources to be able to

affect the out-of-work benefit claimant numbers in their areas, and hence accountability for these targets followed from that transfer of responsibility. The assumption was that welfare-to-work services have a direct effect on the benefit claimant levels in the area, but the links between the two need to be explored and understood more carefully. CS did not cover all the out-of-work benefit claimants in the area, and those who were in contact with CS provision were not necessarily those closest to the labour market.

Targets were monitored by the DWP, though these were only part of the story in terms of the evaluation techniques and methods being employed at various levels and by various actors. CS was subject to both national and local evaluation. CSPs were responsible for producing their own local evaluations to address questions of foremost importance to them. These local evaluations varied in terms of the amount of resource dedicated to them and also the substance of the questions posed. On the whole though, the local evaluations were much more slanted to considerations of how the partnerships operated within 'soft space', by addressing issues of partnership working and focusing on learning rather than on hard outcomes such as reducing numbers of out-of-work benefit claimants and raising employment rates. By contrast, the national evaluation commissioned by the DWP addressed questions which DWP was most interested in, and this meant a focus on hard outcomes not typically found in local evaluations. The sorts of questions which CSPs were interested in answering were those which allowed them to learn lessons about how to approach issues for future work (Green et al 2010, Green and Adam 2011). For the CSP leads/partnership members interviewed/surveyed it was evident that CS was about more than just getting people into work; it was about new ways of working, about joining up policy domains, and also about testing how localisation or different forms of devolution of power could operate in practice.

Relationships within local partnerships (horizontal coordination)

In this sub-section the ways in which the CSPs operated are explored, including across policy domains and across spatial boundaries, to establish some of the ways in which partnership activity added value to the welfare-to-work domain. Additionally, by considering some of the challenges faced by the partners and by the partnerships, the value of some of the softer elements of space and outcomes are illustrated.

The ways in which CS operated in soft space in terms of building capacity within institutions and within areas, indicate how the partnerships built capacity, added value to the statutory provision and added to the thickness of services are considered below. Various dimensions are discussed in relation to partnership working, such as raising the profile of worklessness as an issue, how partnerships agreed shared goals and priorities, provided a more tailored service through referrals and greater awareness of provision, brought in partners with agendas not traditionally part of the narrower supply-side welfare-to-work conversations. The primacy of institutional identity over partnership identity and difficulties of aligning partnership objectives with institutional objectives are two areas which are explored in greater detail to illuminate these points.

Part of the task CSPs faced was to raise the profile of worklessness and extend the issue of worklessness to policy domains which had previously paid it little attention. There were instances of CSPs working with different partners covering such policy domains as health and housing. Repeatedly, CSP contacts emphasised the benefits of working with others in different policy domains. They noted advantages of understanding the different operational

and strategic priorities of partners working in the same soft space and in fields which although not directly related to worklessness often had points of overlap (in that large numbers of people accessing these other services were also in receipt of out-of-work benefits. One CSP lead noted that during the course of the CS initiative "collaborative working with most partners has improved" with "[partners] understanding respective roles more".

Working with new partners, sometimes across administrative boundaries and across policy domains also brought challenges, and often the challenges which presented themselves originated from decisions which were taken at national level and over which the CSPs had no control. Pooling and aligning of funding was one issue where CSPs hoped to improve performance to ensure that funds were aligned around the same objectives and where possible funds were pooled so that savings could be made, for example by commissioning across multiple authorities together, rather than each authority having to incur the time and expense of commissioning separately. The CSPs had to deal with negotiating among themselves, but in a climate where central government could and did change the terms of negotiation. The clearest example of this related to changes to funding protocols. The distribution of Deprived Area Funding, which partners had routinely referred to positively as allowing unprecedented flexibility, changed in England during the course of the CS initiative from a CSP partnership allocation model to a local authority allocation model. In some instances this led to protracted discussions about allocating the money as local authorities tended to assume that money allocated to the authority should be spent within the authority, rather than being used to address broader partnership aims. This was further complicated by the fact that in some multi-authority partnerships monies were allocated to only some of the local authorities; in these instances there was a greater chance of those who were allocated the funds tending to see that money as for their authority, rather than for the partnership. This highlights the

challenges and tensions of working within 'soft space' where negotiation is of high importance. Individual partners had to balance the need to be partnership members with their own organisation's needs and in instances such as these, the default position for many was to serve the interests of the latter; as one CS lead explained: "I think when push comes to shove partners maintain loyalty to their own organisation as a whole". This was rationalised by the fact that: "their organisation is their paymaster". This helps explain why alignment of targets tended to be easier to achieve than pooling of funding.

One of the rationales for pooling funding was to achieve cost savings through planning and commissioning services at the scale of a functional economic geography and across administrative boundaries. Working across boundaries on this basis was cited by many interviewees from multi-authority CSPs as a means of introducing economies of scale into the procurement process. There were some concerns that these gains may be offset by the need to secure agreement across local authorities, and this may hamper ability to respond quickly when new opportunities presented themselves. The Future Jobs Fund, a challenge fund to create new jobs (Houghton et al 2009), provides evidence in both directions on this point. CSPs did bid and were successful in achieving funds through this source and some noted the gains that were made through having CSP-wide central partnership bid; Greater Manchester was one such CSP. On the other hand, other CSP interviewees reported that the process of gaining agreement across a number of partners was so time consuming in itself that it was better for local authorities to submit separate applications in order to meet the deadline. This is what happened in the Birmingham, Coventry and Black Country CSP. These differences in approach reflect variations in the nature of local partnerships, their underlying philosophies and the varying commitment of partnership members.

Green and Adam (2011) identify different approaches to partner behaviour on these issues from full pooling to consultation to independence. Political considerations were often apparent in discussions about how to allocate resource. Often these issues tended to cut across considerations of need. In terms of partnership working the twin challenges for individuals of being members of a partnership and also having 'day jobs' to represent certain areas (either geographical or policy based) were difficult to reconcile. This raised questions about whether it was realistic to expect partnership members (especially local authorities, given that their first priority is their own residents) to give up the direct control of resource to the wider partnership as a whole.

These points highlight the challenges of operating within a soft space. Foremost is the relational aspect of operating with other bodies. Partnership representatives need to work out how to co-exist with dual identities and being part of the partnership when also serving the needs of the individual partnership members which are individuals' ultimate employers. Working in soft space requires a partnership approach and, in the CS example, there were many opportunities for aligning and pooling resources. The examples above have shown that there are challenges and tensions in addition to opportunities. This highlights the need for effective evaluation of operations within soft space. There is a need to understand how actors within soft spaces operate in their specific contexts, to go beyond the idea that the processes are complicated and the arguments nuanced, to give greater understanding of what actually constitutes success.

Partnership working was supported by those within CSPs as an approach which could deliver benefits in terms of the way in which things were done as well as the effects which were achieved. Hence evaluation of CS needed to consider process, targets, and culture (Green et

al 2010, Green and Adam 2011). It is of course not surprising that CSP partnership members were supportive of the general approach to working in partnership, given their close involvement with the work, their initial support and a degree of self interest in ensuring that the positive experiences of the initiative were highlighted. This would not be to suggest that interviews with partnership representatives were not uncritical; partners were interested in how to improve and were able to engage in critical reflection on their experiences.

Interviewees and survey respondents suggested benefits of working together within their designated partnership but also of working with other partnerships to share knowledge and pass information. One interviewee from a national agency explained that CS had spawned "a strong infrastructure supporting cross organisation dialogue through work groups and networking events", while less formally another considered that: "the partnership has added some value by ensuring that communication channels are opened with other organisations who can help the employment and skills agenda". Hence at local level partners felt that there was benefit in coming together, understanding agendas and seeing how their activities related to the other partners' activities. They felt there was value in getting to know the other actors in the local area in terms of building up a diary of contacts – both for CSP local partnership work and for their roles within their own organisations; as one local third sector CS partner noted: "The huge improvement from CS is the strength of local relationships".

The soft space though 'created' by central government giving the CSPs their status and creating the impetus for partnership formation, would not have been as energised without the seedcorn funding which DWP supplied to partnerships on an equal basis irrespective of the size of the partnership. Where (some of) this money was deployed to provide an independent secretariat, this was invaluable in providing a focus for the partnership and the resource to

drive it forward. This was one way in which partnership activity could be protected from the issue of having to operate alongside individual members' 'day jobs'. This highlights the importance of how soft space is both defined but also how the actors within that space need to be resourced and skilled to craft and implement new policy approaches (see Keep 2015).

Consideration of some of these softer outcomes through evaluation allows reflection upon and improvement of the process associated with delivering welfare-to-work initiatives within the complex and fragmented soft spaces within which these partnerships operated. Importantly focusing on soft outcomes allows exploration of links between theory and outcome, so that 'good' or 'bad' performance against some of the harder outcome measures can be linked back to the approaches taken.

Outcomes – targets and measures of success

Since CS was an initiative designed to tackle worklessness at one level it seems a truism that the success or failure of the initiative should be determined by out-of-work benefit reductions and the levels of employment subsequent to the initiative; that is outcomes which might be thought of as 'hard'. Issues of attribution, coverage of the initiatives' interventions, the different circumstances and needs of client groups and the recession made making sense of the aggregate level data of benefit levels and employment rates extremely challenging; none of the CSPs achieved the initial two year targets (Green et al 2010).

The recession and its effects underlined some of the issues of reliance on hard (and absolute) measures to evaluate performance. The lack of progress towards the initial targets for 2009 with the onset of recession in 2008 meant that national targets for the second two years of the

CS initiative were recast in terms of relative performance against different benchmarks. Rather than having to reduce benefit numbers by a certain figure, CSPs were tasked with closing the gap between the claimant rates in the worst areas with the region as a whole. In this way 'progress' could still be achieved and demonstrated using hard outcome measures even in a situation where benefit numbers were rapidly increasing.

Additionally, CSPs had freedom to develop their own local their targets in the way which best suited their local labour market conditions. Some CSPs decided to target their resources spatially by focussing on the most deprived neighbourhoods; others chose to target resources at specific client groups (Green et al 2010, Green and Adam 2011), so illustrating differences in local approaches.

The way in which measures of success are conceived has important implications for how activity is organised and how efforts are directed. This is explored in the following section.

Discussion

Reflecting on the issues raised above, a number of points emerge relating to evaluation activity in soft space.

Hard outcomes can be brittle and may work against long-term thinking. Softer outcomes may be more sustainable. There is a danger that setting only hard outcome measures will drive behaviour geared towards only delivering those outcomes. Effecting cultural change within partnerships/organisations may drop off the list of priorities at times when hard outcome measures are prioritised at national level. A typical hard outcome in the case of

welfare-to-work initiatives (such as CS) is the numbers that get into work. This may or may not be achieved because of the initiatives which are in place or the work which has been undertaken by the partnership. For instance a major new development may create a large number of job opportunities and recruit locally available job-ready labour reducing the unemployment benefit count by doing so. If hard outcome targets are met, irrespective of the way in which this has happened, then it may be thought that there is no further necessity for scrutiny of the process, and when time is scarce, further exploration of the reasons why certain policy interventions have worked. A focus on soft outcomes may lead partnerships to focus on sustainable behaviour and implementing a change in culture. Cultural change was an important issue for CSPs and evidence of success in relation to this has been presented above – particularly in regard to extending the range of organisations and policy areas which had not traditionally been integrated into the tackling worklessness agenda. Hence for partnerships to be successful there needs to be this evidence of cultural change, which can come through understanding how perspectives have changed and how this translates into operational decisions.

There is a suspicion that softer outcomes are somehow less worthy as measures of success than hard evidence (Haughton and Allmendinger 2008), and there is a danger that using terms 'hard' and 'soft' may reinforce and perpetuate this impression. However this interpretation should not be the case; the terms imply no judgement about robustness. The different types of evidence serve different purposes. Put crudely, hard evidence is about making a judgement of success and soft evidence about improving service delivery. Yet arguably both have a place and a function. Hard outcomes may be useful for impact evaluation whereas soft outcomes are more useful when looking at issues relating to process.

As outlined above, CS was conceived when general economic conditions were favourable and this played into the design and the remit which CSPs were asked to address. It was recognised that in order to achieve the target employment rate of 80% of the working age population that groups on inactive benefits who hitherto had been subject to minimal contact with state agencies would be required to take steps towards securing employment. The target groups under consideration are extremely important when considering what might be appropriate measures of success.

Furthermore the hard outcome methodology adopted by DWP for the CS initiative looked at the whole of the CSP area, and the total populations on the main out-of-work benefits. Yet CS activity only covered a small proportion of this benefit population. Without individual level tracking data it is impossible to attribute outcomes to CS activity. So it might be known that employment rates have risen in a particular area, and might also be known that there have been certain welfare-to-work support activities in the area, but it cannot be known whether the people entering jobs and hence contributing to the increased employment rate received that support, nor, if received, the extent to which this support contributed to the eventual job outcome. Questions regarding attribution, spatial and client coverage of the initiative and the fragmented policy landscape mean that straightforward hard outcome targets may not be appropriate on their own as measures of success or failure in the case of CS. The more technical aspects of measurement interact with policy design to inform evaluation choices in terms of the aims and theory behind the intervention.

The issue of how measures of success may influence partnership behaviour, and then the implications of this, is relevant for policy makers when considering future policy design. CS provides examples of this which are outlined more fully below.

In the case of the CS initiative, there was clearly a balance to be struck for some CSPs between operational and strategic issues and this maps on to issues of hard and soft outcomes. CSPs were certainly under some pressure from DWP and local partners to demonstrate 'quick wins'. Regardless of questions of attribution, at the outset CSPs were eager to show to one another and to DWP the progress which was being made in their CSP areas on (un)employment rates. CSPs clearly had a difficult task on their hands with this issue. Their stated aim was to work with those furthest from the labour market, but at the same time they were tasked with reducing the numbers of claimants on out-of-work benefits in a short period of time. This may have affected behaviour in certain ways. Target culture not only affected 'partnership' behaviour, but also the behaviour of constituent partners in accordance with their organisation-specific targets.

Although ultimately the CS initiative ran for four years, it was initially set up to run for two years. Given the long histories of industrial decline and of poor economic performance characteristic of many of the CSP areas, four years is too short a timescale to make really significant progress, especially in geographies with long-entrenched problems of worklessness – and certainly at a time when the national economic picture changed markedly in a negative direction. It is of course desirable from a policy-making perspective to have clearly defined measures in place which are capable of capturing when policies have succeeded and when they have failed. However, reliance solely on hard outcome targets is unlikely to provide the necessary information in a context of local partnerships and fragmentation of service delivery across organisations and policy domains.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to take forward the debate on the utility of 'soft spaces' and 'soft outcomes' developed in a different policy domain by applying them to welfare-to-work policies. CS has provided an interesting example of a policy initiative to test these concepts in action, since it operated within a soft space – a hollowed out space – where central government created the space for welfare-to-work interventions to be orchestrated and managed by local partnerships. Certainly some of the issues which have been discussed are particular to the CS experience, but many are generic such as issues of central-local tension, (re)negotiation over priorities, and perhaps most importantly, measures of success of policy interventions. In this regard the CS initiative is instructive as it shows the shifts over time in the efficacy of specific hard outcome measures relating to absolute reductions in out-of-work benefit claimant levels and also the impact which wider economic forces can have on policy and how policy success is measured. Over the lifetime of the CS initiative absolute hard outcome targets were replaced by targets expressed in relative terms, and there was greater interest in soft outcomes relating to improved 'ways of working'. Yet at a time of ever greater emphasis on policy assessment and achieving value for money there is an ongoing focus on hard outcomes and a danger that soft outcomes are overlooked.

Conceptualising of local partnerships in the welfare-to-work domain in terms of initiatives operating in soft space and producing soft outcomes gives greater understanding to processes in a way which reliance on hard outcome measures does not. Hence, soft outcomes should be considered to fully understand the nature of activity within soft space so that improvements in strategy and service delivery can be achieved and so that hard outcomes can be better contextualised. Consideration of soft outcomes is useful to better understand and

contextualise hard outcome measures, but also of itself to aid learning and support incremental change.

Soft spaces emerge as part of the political decision making process which has been evident in various policy domains (here welfare-to-work) which place increasing importance on the market mechanism. In the case of welfare-to-work this has resulted in a fragmented policy landscape, where decisions are taken at different levels of government which operate at different spatial scales. The neoliberal market-based approach which has been responsible for the creation of these soft spaces has also promoted cultures dominated by ideas of value for money, and payment by results. Thus the impact of the CS in terms of its legacy for the welfare-to-work responses which have come subsequently has been highly constrained; economic crisis and the subsequent policies of austerity have had a major influence over this constraint. Local partners may have carried through insights gained through CS to their subsequent activities, though the legacy of CS in terms of the evaluation of soft spaces has been limited to date. Because of the fragmented nature of provision, it is difficult to pinpoint examples of how the learning and the insights gained from CS activity have been taken on by individual partnership members; learning is likely to be widespread in terms of ways of working, rather than being intervention-specific. The broader context of austerity and value for money has crowded out many of sorts of messages and arguments which have been advanced here. The irony is not lost: the neoliberal framework which results in the creation of soft spaces also promotes harder types of evaluation, which although they have utility, are not suitable for gaining a full understanding of processes in soft space.

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