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LIVING METRICS: A SUMMATION OF INSIGHTS & CONVERSATIONS





LIVING METRICS: BUILDING EVALUATION GROUNDED IN PEOPLE & PLACE

This document distils a day of deep discussion and creative exploration focused on transforming evaluation in arts, culture, and community work. Participants shared insights on how evaluation can honour lived experience, build trust, and drive personal and systemic change. Together, we explored the social value of arts practice, the importance of relationships, and the power of creative, inclusive methods. Emerging principles call for evaluation that is compassionate, participatory, and justice-focused, balancing accountability with learning. This report summarises key themes and principles, offering a roadmap for evaluation that truly reflects the transformative nature of arts and community practice.

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SYNOPSIS OF THE DAY

On 8th July 2025, a group of practitioners, commissioners, and collaborators working across culture, community, and place gathered at the Marine Workshops in Newhaven for a day-long workshop exploring how we define and evidence value in ways that are meaningful, ethical, and grounded in lived experience.

The workshop aimed to:

- Examine how value is currently framed and evidenced in community and cultural work.
- Challenge dominant assumptions underpinning traditional evaluation models.
- Surface more grounded, ethical, and lived-experience-led ways of telling the story of impact.
- Share tools and concepts for reframing value propositions and influencing decision-makers.

Morning Sessions - Surfacing the Old Story

The morning focused on naming the current reality and its limits. Through paired conversations and group discussions, participants mapped out:

- How they currently demonstrate impact (methods, tools, measures).
- The frustrations, gaps, and systemic obstacles in traditional evaluation practices.
- The costs, both practical and ethical, of persisting with models that fail to capture the complexity of place-based work.

Afternoon Sessions - Creating the New Story

In the afternoon, the group shifted from problem-mapping to solution-building. Participants engaged in collaborative exercises to:

- Identify gaps and opportunities in existing evaluation tools.
- Stress-test new metrics and storytelling approaches against the realities of funder expectations and systemic change.
- Begin developing a shared toolkit and potential manifesto for reframing evaluation practices.

The day closed by capturing unanswered questions and next steps, laying the groundwork for collective action and future conversations with funders and partners.

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE QUESTIONS

1. Evaluation is Both a Tool and a Struggle

Meaning:

Across the data, participants recognise evaluation as essential. It's how they learn, prove their worth, communicate with funders, and advocate for change. Yet they also experience it as burdensome, extractive, and misaligned with the spirit of their work.

Implications:

- The sector needs an overhaul of how evaluation is designed, resourced, and valued.
- There's a call for 'evaluation as relationship,' not just as reporting.

3. The Sector is Hungry for Storytelling and Qualitative Insight

Meaning:

Narrative methods – storytelling, observation, creative tools – are repeatedly highlighted as what works. Practitioners believe stories capture emotional, social, and systemic change in ways numbers cannot.

Implications:

- Evaluation frameworks should formally validate narrative and creative methods as legitimate evidence.
- Funders need guidance on how to interpret qualitative data and integrate it into decision-making.
- Storytelling offers a powerful bridge between community experience and policy influence.

5. Equity and Inclusion are Central – but Not Yet Embedded

Meaning:

Equity is a non-negotiable priority for practitioners. Yet they find evaluation systems still dominated by white, patriarchal, and ableist norms. There's a hunger to normalise evaluation practices that are racially, culturally, gender, disability, and LGBTQIAI+ affirmative.

Implications:

- Practitioners want to co-create evaluation tools with communities whose voices are typically marginalised.
- Funders should invest in anti-oppressive evaluation capacity building.
- Equity must move from rhetoric to reality in evaluation practice.

2. Dominance of Top-Down Systems Silences Complex Realities

Meaning:

Traditional evaluation frameworks, driven by funders and bureaucratic systems, flatten the nuance of place-based, cultural, and community work. Metrics are often imposed rather than co-created, prioritising quantifiable outputs over transformative stories.

Implications:

- Practitioners want power shifted toward communities to define what matters and how it's measured.
- Funders must engage as partners willing to listen, learn, and share risk.
- There's growing fatigue and frustration with systems that demand reports but don't act on insights.

4. Absence is Data: Who Isn't Seen, Who Isn't Heard

Meaning:

Practitioners are deeply concerned about invisible audiences: people who don't participate, communities silenced by systemic barriers, or those whose stories are uncomfortable for funders to hear.

Implications:

- Evaluation must intentionally seek out absence and silence as critical data points.
- New methodologies are needed to uncover why people disengage and what systems are inadvertently excluded.
- Failing to capture these gaps risks reinforcing inequity.

6. Short-Termism Undermines Long-Term Impact

Meaning:

Practitioners know real change unfolds over years. Yet evaluation systems - and funding - remain short-term. Ripple effects, systemic change, and deep transformation are invisible under current reporting timelines.

Implications:

- Funders should support longitudinal evaluation approaches.
- Organisations need tools to capture legacy, ripple effects, and cumulative change.
- A time horizon mismatch threatens to undervalue meaningful work.

7. Evaluation Fatigue is Real – and Undermines Purpose

Meaning:

Practitioners describe evaluation as joyless, heavy, and disconnected from purpose. Instead of fuelling learning, it can drain morale and feel futile. Repetition, form-filling, and administrative burden erode energy for meaningful insight.

Implications:

- Evaluation must become simpler, lighter, and more integrated into practice.
- Creativity and joy should be central design principles, not afterthoughts.
- Funders should prioritise quality over quantity of data collected.

9. The Sector is Imagining New Approaches

Meaning:

Despite frustrations, practitioners are creatively imagining new ways to evaluate:

- Embodied methods
- Visual and audio storytelling
- Participatory models
- Ripple-effect mapping
- Co-creation of metrics

This isn't a rejection of evaluation—it's a radical reimagining.

Implications:

- Funders and institutions should partner with practitioners to pilot and validate innovative methods.
- The sector is a living laboratory for rethinking how value is defined and evidenced.

8. Practitioners Want Evaluation that Feels Mutual, Not Extractive

Meaning:

Evaluation is often described as extractive – communities give their stories, time, and emotional labour, but receive little in return. People want evaluation to generate value for those who participate.

Implications:

- Evaluation should close feedback loops and visibly show participants how their input shapes action.
- Reciprocity – giving back insights, learning, or benefits – must be a core principle.

10. Evaluation is About Power

Meaning:

At its core, the conversation about evaluation is a conversation about power. Who defines value? Who decides what counts as evidence? Who controls resources? Who is heard – and who remains invisible?

Implications:

- Any reform of evaluation must centre equity, justice, and shared decision-making.
- Practitioners want evaluation to shift from being a tool of control to a tool of liberation.

CROSS-CUTTING INSIGHTS

1. The sector wants evaluation to be creative, human, and relational.
2. Data is important—but only when paired with context, stories, and meaning.
3. Equity isn't an optional extra—it's fundamental to ethical evaluation.
4. Funders must listen differently – not only to numbers but to lived realities.
5. The sector is ready for a radical evolution of evaluation practices.

OVERALL REFLECTION:

Practitioners are not rejecting evaluation. They're calling for it to come alive—to reflect complexity, honour humanity, and help transform systems rather than merely describe them.

The future of evaluation is about shifting from counting activities to understanding change. And it's about making sure everyone has a voice in defining what that change looks like.

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM DREAMER, EDITOR, MAKER

Emotion and narrative matter.

Participants connect deeply to stories and moments that reflect real human experiences, both joyful and painful. The Dreamer, Editor, Maker approach helped surface emotional truths and revealed how people perceive social value through personal and collective stories.

Highlighting gaps and tensions.

'Editing' conversations revealed gaps in current evaluation language, where community realities and sector terminology often clash. Participants expressed frustration with evaluation processes that feel extractive, alienating, or disconnected from lived experience.

The power of reframing.

The 'Making' element allowed participants to reshape how evaluation could be imagined, moving from rigid frameworks to creative, relational, and playful approaches. This sparked ideas for accessible, neuro-affirmative, and inclusive methods that better reflect the spirit of arts and community work.

Social value shown through loss as well as gain.

The exercise highlighted how social value often becomes most visible when it's threatened or lost (e.g. closure of spaces like New England House). Participants articulated that evaluation needs to capture not just positive impact but the community impact of things being taken away.

Desire for creative methods.

Participants were energised by creative tools (like storytelling, visual mapping, photovoice) as valid forms of evidence. They see these as not merely 'alternative' but essential for surfacing hidden narratives and diverse perspectives.

Frustration with 'highlight reels.'

Participants pushed back on the idea that evaluation should only showcase successes. They stressed the importance of documenting challenges, unmet needs, and systemic barriers as part of an honest narrative.

Recognition of administrative burden.

The exercise surfaced concern that evaluation often takes time and resources away from the core creative work. Participants want evaluation processes that are lighter, more integrated, and respectful of the capacity of grassroots organisations.

Interconnectedness of individual and collective change.

Participants articulated that evaluation should capture both personal transformation and ripple effects across communities, systems, and places. They see arts and community work as deeply interconnected with broader social change.

Collective sense-making is key.

Across the exercise, there was a strong call for evaluation as a shared process, where communities, practitioners, and funders reflect and learn together rather than being separated into data producers and data consumers.

BIG QUESTIONS IN EVALUATION

This section explores the Big Questions raised during the day, capturing the critical issues, provocations, and deeper reflections that challenge current evaluation practices and point towards bold new possibilities for the future.

1. Balancing Funders' Needs with Authentic Practice

Key insights:

- Practitioners struggle to reconcile the diverse, sometimes conflicting demands of multiple funders.
- They want evaluation tools that satisfy external reporting while staying true to their own values and community focus.
- People question how to push back when funders' evaluation requirements feel irrelevant or misaligned.

Example notes:

- 'How do we use a consistent set of questions to respond to differing funder needs?'
- 'How do I tell a funder that what they want to find out isn't that useful or representative of their investment?'

Implications / reflections:

- Practitioners seek flexibility and courage to negotiate evaluation terms with funders.
- There's a desire for funders to respect the expertise of organisations about what matters locally.

2. Managing Bias and Integrity in Data Collection

Key insights:

- Practitioners worry about positive bias in participant feedback, driven by politeness, fear of repercussion, or gratitude.
- There's anxiety about how honest feedback can be when participants know funders or services might see their responses.
- People want methods that create safe spaces for authentic responses.

Example notes:

- 'How do we reduce positive bias in participant responses?'

Implications / reflections:

- Practitioners need tools and methodologies that encourage honesty without fear.
- There's an ethical dimension to ensuring evaluation reflects genuine community voice.

3. Evaluation as a Tool for Systems Change

Key insights:

- Practitioners wrestle with a paradox: they seek funding from systems they might also wish to critique or transform.
- They question how to stay authentic in wanting to disrupt inequitable systems while relying on those same systems for funding.
- Evaluation feels both a means to challenge power and a mechanism that sustains it.

Example notes:

- 'How do we navigate wanting to get funding to disrupt the systems funders support?'

Implications / reflections:

- Practitioners want evaluation to become a tool for systemic advocacy.
- There's tension between being critical and staying fundable.

4. Telling the Right Story While Still Securing Resources

Key insights:

- Practitioners feel caught between telling stories funders want to hear and telling stories that reflect deeper, more complex realities.
- There's anxiety about how to frame work as the solution to need without losing the narrative of ongoing support requirements.
- People want honest storytelling that still sustains organisational survival.

Example notes:

- 'How can I position my work to be the solution to need - and still ask for the money?'

Implications / reflections:

- Organisations seek storytelling strategies that are truthful yet persuasive.
- Practitioners want language that reflects both value and ongoing need.

5. Embedding Equity and Inclusion in Evaluation

Key insights:

- Practitioners believe evaluation should be actively inclusive and affirming of diverse identities.
- They want evaluation frameworks that reflect the needs and experiences of marginalized groups.
- The goal is to normalise equitable evaluation rather than treating it as an add-on.

Example notes:

- 'How do we normalise the creation of evaluations which are disability, gender, youth, racially, culturally, LGBTQIA+ affirmative?'

Cont./

Implications / reflections:

- There's urgency for anti-oppressive, intersectional approaches to evaluation.
- Practitioners want evaluation to dismantle barriers, not reinforce them.

Meta-Themes Across 'Big Questions'

- Practitioners feel caught between external pressures and internal ethics.
- Equity and justice are non-negotiable priorities, yet often under-supported in evaluation frameworks.
- Honesty and authenticity remain central but risky when tied to funding.
- Evaluation is both a practical necessity and a site of political struggle.

Overall Reflections:

- These questions reveal practitioners' deep care for their communities and frustration with systemic constraints.
- The sector is asking: 'Can evaluation become an ally rather than an obstacle?'
- There's hope that reimagining evaluation can help bridge the gap between community voice and systemic change.



AN EMERGING SET OF PLACE-BASED EVALUATION PRINCIPLES

Arts, cultural and community practice generates profound social value, fostering belonging, wellbeing, and transformation for individuals and places. Evaluation in this context cannot be merely transactional or retrospective; it must be participatory, compassionate, and shaped by those most affected.

These *emerging principles* reflect a collective call to reimagine evaluation as a relational, creative, and justice-driven practice, one that measures what truly matters, learns from what doesn't work, and helps communities, practitioners, and funders move forward together.

This framework honours lived experience, challenges systems of exclusion, and embraces innovative methods to capture both immediate outcomes and long-term ripple effects. The principles below draw together insights from practitioners, community voices, and sector research to guide meaningful, transformative evaluation practice.

A synopsis follows immediately; the full set of emerging principles can be found further below.

1. Social and Cultural Impact

Evaluation must capture how arts and community projects shape identity, belonging, and place, using creative methods to value lived experience and community-defined success.

2. Community and Relationships

Relationships of trust, reciprocity, and co-creation are both the process and the outcome, and evaluation should be an ongoing, non-intrusive conversation built on shared learning.

3. Access, Equity, and Inclusion

Evaluation should actively remove barriers, centre diverse voices, and use neuro-affirmative and anti-colonial approaches, co-created with communities and mindful of capacity constraints.

4. Creativity and Expression

Creative tools like storytelling, photovoice, and art-based methods are essential for meaningful evaluation, capturing insights traditional tools miss and resonating with both communities and funders.

5. Wellbeing and Personal Transformation

Evaluation must recognise wellbeing, mental health, and personal growth as core outcomes, valuing compassion and human-centred practices as vital indicators of success.

6. Environmental and Place-Based Connection

Evaluation should measure how projects deepen connections to place and environment, assessing impacts on community cohesion and perceptions of local spaces.

7. Evaluation Practice, Learning, and Reflexivity

Evaluation should shift from proving to improving, be embedded in practice, and balance accountability with ongoing learning through adaptive, collaborative approaches.

8. Power, Systems, and Social Change

Evaluation must challenge power imbalances, amplify marginalised voices, and contribute to systemic change, co-defining success with communities for genuine social justice outcomes.

9. Innovation and Future Practices

Future-facing evaluation should embrace digital and creative tools to simplify processes and build shared knowledge, while keeping relational and human values at its core.

CHARTING THE PATH AHEAD: BUILDING A TRANSFORMATIVE EVALUATION CULTURE ROOTED IN JUSTICE AND PLACE

Evaluation must change - and across Sussex and beyond, there is a shared appetite for a new kind of practice: one rooted in justice, creativity, and the power of place.

This summation document captures a collective call to move away from extractive models of evaluation and toward approaches that honour lived experience, nurture mutual learning, and support systemic change. Practitioners are ready. What's needed now is sustained support, shared tools, and space to make this shift real.

The insights gathered point to a sector hungry for frameworks that reflect the depth of personal and collective transformation, for storytelling that matters, and for metrics that make meaning. There is a clear mandate to simplify evaluation processes, integrate creative and smart tools, and centre qualitative insight and long-term impact.

Evaluation is often expected to satisfy external accountability demands, typically framed through a positivist lens and driven by success metrics. At the same time, it must also serve as a meaningful, generative process of reflection, experimentation, and expansive learning, including learning from failure. These dual purposes are too often treated as mutually exclusive. To move forward, we must confront and reconcile this contradiction, designing evaluation processes that serve both integrity and utility.

At the time of both gathering Living Metrics and writing its summation, Sussex is moving towards devolution and Local Government Reorganisation, and, with it, a more place-responsive governance and funding landscape. The ability to generate, share, and interpret data collectively across Sussex will become ever more vital. Building a nuanced, place-based evidence culture - one that enables intra-county and cross-sector learning, supports business and investment cases, and surfaces the true impact of cultural and civic action - will be foundational to shaping an inclusive and effective devolved future.

Several key pathways have emerged to enable this shift:

- Creating space for shared learning and exchange across Sussex - spaces where funders, practitioners, and communities can co-develop evaluation approaches in response to place-based needs and ambitions.
- Investing in accessible, open source and Creative Commons digital tools and creative methods to reduce administrative burden, democratise data collection, and support collective reflection.
- Building evaluation capacity through solidarity, with larger organisations resourcing, mentoring, and standing alongside smaller and grassroots groups in a shared commitment to reflective practice.
- Aligning expectations with resources, ensuring ethical, realistic evaluation that centres relationships over reporting and supports long-term, embedded change.

Together, these actions form the basis of a new roadmap, one that can build a more inclusive, reflective, and ultimately transformative culture of evaluation. If we take them seriously, evaluation in Sussex can become a powerful tool not just for measuring change, but for making it.