

LAMBETH PREVENTION AND PROMOTION OF BETTER MENTAL HEALTH

**A Realist Evaluation of three community-based programmes:
Methods Briefing**

Briefing Report - May 2024



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Background

This briefing outlines the methodology for a Realist Evaluation of three community-based programmes delivered with funding from the former Public Health England, as part of the Prevention and Promotion for Better Mental Health fund.

Lambeth Borough Council were one of many local authorities who successfully bid for funding from this scheme. Lambeth funded nine different initiatives between Autumn 2021 and Autumn 2022. All were community-based programmes aiming to target people most in need of support with mental health in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. For details on how funding was allocated and applied across projects see our Costings briefing [here](#).

Three of the nine programmes were the focus of this evaluation (please see the programme specific briefings on the PHIRST website [here](#)), they were:

- 1) The Black Men's Consortium
- 2) The Outreach Worker based at the Ascension Trust
- 3) The Loneliness project

The Realist Evaluation Approach

Realist Evaluation (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) is a way of assessing whether social programmes or interventions such as those listed above, are effective or not. Instead of just asking "did it work or not?", this approach tries to understand what specific aspects of the programme worked, for whom they worked, and under what circumstances.

The key idea is that programmes do not work the same way for everyone in every situation. Their success depends on the **context** – the specific setting, environment, and characteristics of the people involved. Realist Evaluation looks at how the context interacts with the different components of the programme and the way people respond to them (the "**mechanisms**") to produce **outcomes** or results (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Relationship between Context, Mechanisms and Outcomes in Realist Evaluation



The process involves developing theories about what contexts and mechanisms might lead to success, testing them out, typically in interviews with people who have experience of the programme, and refining the understanding over time. The goal is to get a nuanced picture of what's working, what's not, and why – so programmes can be improved.

In this project time was spent:

1) talking to people at the local authority who had funded the programmes and to various people involved in setting up or leading the programmes;

2) reviewing programme documentation and

3) reviewing relevant academic literature to develop Initial Programme Theories (IPTs) setting out how we thought the three programmes worked, for whom and in what contexts.

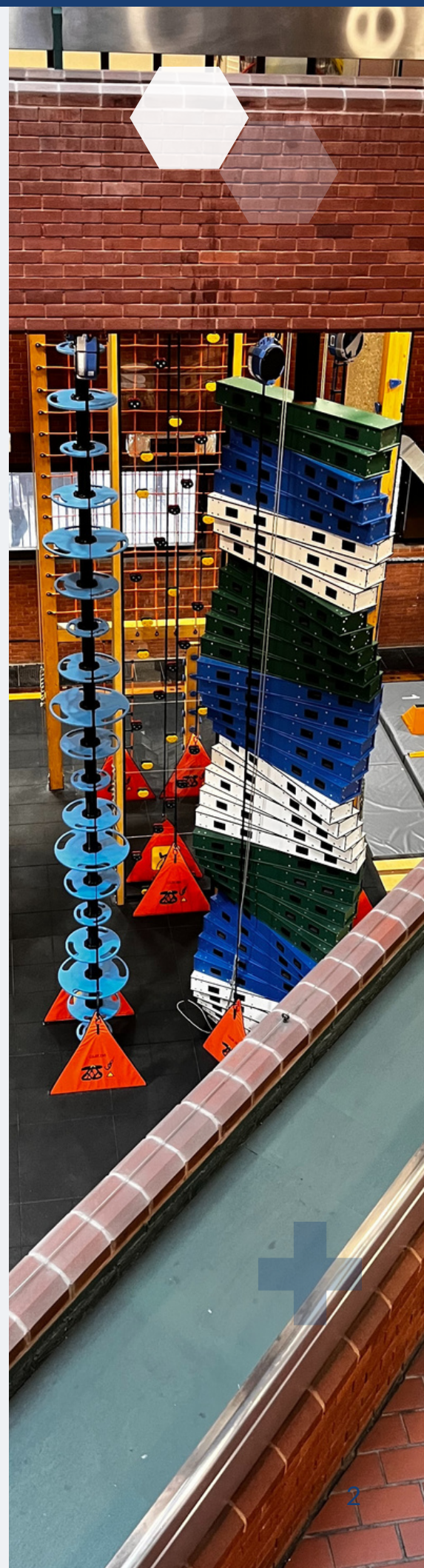
Interviews were then conducted with people who had been involved in setting up and organising the programmes, facilitating and leading the programmes, and people who had used the programmes.

These interviews involved quite direct questions that tested the IPTs to see if people agreed that the ideas generated were accurate from their perspective or whether they thought something different happened.

Recruitment

Reaching staff and volunteers involved in setting up and running the programmes was reasonably straightforward as many were engaged in helping us to think about and plan the evaluation. Staff also helped us promote participation to people who had been involved in the programmes as participants or service users.

There was difficulty in reaching people involved in some parts of the programmes however, because our evaluation was conducted retrospectively. That is, we began recruiting in 2023 after some aspects of the programmes had finished.



Who took part?

Two people from Lambeth Borough Council talked to us; one in a formal interview and one at the IPT development stage. All three programmes were discussed.

Seven people involved in leading or facilitating programmes were interviewed; two from the Black Men's Consortium, three from the Loneliness project and two from the Outreach Worker project.

Fourteen service users talked to us; four from the Black Men's Consortium, five from the Loneliness project and five from the Outreach worker project.

Interviews with staff were conducted on Microsoft Teams and recorded within the software. Some service users' interviews were conducted by phone or MS Teams and some face-to-face at community venues where programmes were being held. All were audio-recorded.

How data were analysed

All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed in full, and the team began by coding transcripts against the IPTs, testing whether the data matched, refuted or expanded on each theory or if new theories might be needed. Initially, team members worked on the same transcripts and met to discuss how IPTs were being interpreted and mapped to the transcript data. Once team members felt more comfortable that they were interpreting data in similar ways, transcripts were split between the team to map content to IPTs and make notes about alternative programme theories or changes that may be needed.

Next, software called Microsoft Visio was used to create detailed visualised programme theories for each transcript with interview content identified as Contexts, Mechanisms and Outcomes. An example can be found [here](#).

Finally, three team members each took responsibility for reviewing the programme theories for one of the three programmes (BMC, Loneliness, Outreach Worker) and comparing them to the IPTs for that programme to develop evolved and/or new theories grounded in the data collected in interviews. Summaries of the final programme theories can be found in the programme specific briefings. Details of the evolution of theories, including IPTs, final theories and summaries are available for each programme here: [BMC](#); [Outreach worker](#), [Loneliness project](#). Overarching themes, also known as demi-regularities that capture the essence of how the three programmes were seen to work can be found [here](#).

REFERENCES

Pawson, R., & Tilley, N. (1997). An introduction to scientific realist evaluation. In E. Chelmsky & W. R. Shadish (Eds.), *Evaluation for the 21st century: A handbook* (pp. 405–418). Sage Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483348896.n29>



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