



Local Area Research + Intelligence Association

LARIA Mini Newsletter September 2026

LARIA Updates

Why Evaluation Matters More Than Ever: Lessons from Recent Local Government Evidence



Local Area Research + Intelligence Association

For many researchers and analysts working in local government, evaluation can sometimes feel like yet another additional reporting requirement attached to programme delivery. Yet a series of recent evaluations (including homelessness, local growth and skills, and community ownership) demonstrates why evaluation is increasingly central to effective public policy. These studies also highlight several methodological lessons that should influence how local authorities design, commission and use evaluation in the future.

The first lesson is that evaluation is no longer primarily about proving impact. Increasingly, it is about understanding systems. Recent evaluations of homelessness and rough sleeping have moved beyond individual interventions to examine how housing, welfare, health, justice and local government interact. Rather than asking simply whether a programme worked, they explored why outcomes emerge within a complex environment. The findings suggest that fragmented funding, conflicting incentives and a persistent focus on crisis response often undermine preventative approaches, regardless of the quality of local services.

This reflects a broader shift towards complexity-aware evaluation. As councils have known for years, many local challenges, including homelessness, economic development and community regeneration, are influenced by multiple organisations and external factors. Traditional experimental approaches are often difficult to apply in such settings.

Consequently, recent evaluations have increasingly used systems mapping, qualitative fieldwork, contribution analysis and mixed-method designs to understand causal pathways rather than attempting to isolate a single intervention effect. The emphasis is increasingly on understanding contribution rather than claiming attribution. We may need to re-consider having systematic reviews of RCTs atop our methodological pyramids?

A second lesson concerns the value of process evaluation. Across multiple policy areas, some of the most useful findings relate not to outcomes but to implementation. Evaluations of local growth funds, skills programmes and place-based regeneration initiatives consistently show that local flexibility enables adaptation to local circumstances. Conversely, they also reveal how compressed delivery timescales can constrain innovation, limit stakeholder engagement and encourage delivery of readily implementable projects rather than longer-term transformation.

Third, the evaluations expose the continuing challenge of measuring long-term outcomes. In local growth programmes, evaluators highlight the difficulty of attributing changes in productivity, employment or economic resilience to specific interventions when impacts emerge over many years and are shaped by wider economic conditions. Similarly, evaluations of community ownership initiatives have already generated evidence of strengthened community participation, local pride and volunteering, but economic sustainability and growth impacts remain less certain because many projects remain at an early stage of development.

This raises an important methodological point. Public sector evaluation often demands evidence before outcomes have had sufficient time to emerge. Analysts should therefore distinguish carefully between outputs, intermediate outcomes and longer-term impacts. Developing robust theories of change and identifying realistic milestones along a causal pathway may provide more meaningful evidence than premature attempts to demonstrate definitive impact. In many cases, demonstrating credible progress towards expected outcomes may be a more realistic and useful objective than proving final impacts.

A fourth lesson concerns the importance of context. Recent place-based evaluations show that outcomes depend heavily on local conditions, governance maturity, partnership networks and existing organisational capacity. Similarly, community ownership projects appear most successful where community organisations already possess strong leadership, governance and project management capabilities. These findings reinforce a recurring conclusion from evaluation research: "what works" is often contingent rather than universal.

For managers commissioning evaluations, this means moving beyond simple questions of effectiveness. The more useful questions are often: what works, for whom, in which circumstances, and through what mechanisms? Evaluations that address these questions may generate practical learning that is far more valuable than a single overall success measure.

Perhaps most importantly, these evaluations demonstrate that good evaluation supports organisational learning rather than accountability alone. While demonstrating value for money remains important, evaluation also provides a mechanism for understanding complexity, adapting delivery, strengthening partnerships and improving future decision-making. In an era of fiscal constraint, rising demand and increasing policy complexity, this learning function may be its greatest contribution.

Taken together, these recent evaluations point towards a more mature understanding of evidence in local public services. They show that evaluation is at its most valuable when it helps organisations understand systems, implementation, context and causation. For local government researchers and analysts, the challenge is not simply to generate more evidence, but to generate evidence that helps decision-makers navigate complexity. In an environment where public services face growing pressures and finite resources, that capability is becoming an essential component of effective public policy and organisational improvement.

Discussion of the available evaluations mentioned are [available here](#).

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**LARIA Autumn Webinar Series begins
next Monday**

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Local Area Research + Intelligence Association

The Autumn Webinar Series starts next Monday, and we're looking forward to welcoming members for a new season of learning, insight, and practical discussion across the local government research community.

Whether you joined us over the summer or you're joining for the first time, this series is a great opportunity to stay connected, build knowledge, and hear from peers across the sector.

If you haven't registered yet, now is the perfect time. Secure your place and be part of the conversation as the Autumn Series gets underway.

[Book now!](#)

Courses, Training Events and Webinars

Upcoming webinar – ‘From manual to automated: Lewisham’s data-driven approach to housing cost verification’ (4 November 2026 14:00)



Join us in this webinar to hear how Lewisham Council transformed a time-consuming manual process into an efficient automated service. Mia Polovina (Data Science, Insight and Performance Lead) and colleagues will showcase how Lewisham's Data Science and Insight Team worked with housing income and support to develop a data-driven Robotic Process Automation (RPA) solution. By automating universal credit housing cost verifications via the DWP Landlord Portal, the team have reduced delays for tenants and freed up significant staff time. The webinar will conclude with a live Q&A session, where you'll have the opportunity to ask questions and find out more about the projects and tools discussed.

[Sign up here.](#)



Exploring Immigration, Integration and Labour Market Outcomes

Thursday 29 October 2026, 10:30am to 11:30am, online

Join **Dr Ezgi Kaya** from Cardiff University as she presents findings from an [ADR UK Research Fellowship](#) examining immigrant labour market integration in England and Wales using linked [ASHE and Census 2011 data](#).

This dataset is available to accredited researchers in the Secure Research Service (SRS).

The research examines labour market inequalities affecting immigrants in England and Wales, highlighting differences in earnings, working patterns and job quality, and how these findings have contributed to wider debates on integration and migration.

[Register now](#)

Code anxiety club

13:30 - 14:00

Online



Feeling overwhelmed by the command line? Confused by file pathways? Want to

navigate the world of coding with confidence? Join the Code Anxiety Club!

Viewers can follow along as we work through common beginner topics while coding live for a quick half hour. No prior experience, installed software or setup required. Viewers can interact via the YouTube chat (you must have a YouTube account to comment) and we will try our best to answer your questions and comments.

There is no need to book a place, please follow the livestream links below to join the sessions.

Workshop date and topic

Connecting a GitHub repository to an IDE

To join this session, please follow the link to [our livestream - 6 October 2026](#)

An Introduction to APIs

To join this session, please follow the link to [our livestream - 20 October 2026](#)

Introduction to the Command Line

To join this session, please follow the link to [our livestream - 3 November 2026](#)

Package It Up: Installing Software and Libraries

To join this session, please follow the link to [our livestream - 17 November 2026](#)

Getting started with Git: Version Control Basics

To join this session, please follow the link to [our livestream - 1 December 2026](#)

[More information](#)

Introduction to synthetic data

30 Sept 2026

14:00-15:00

Online

This free online workshop about synthetic data, organised by the UK Data Service, has three parts:

- A presentation to introduce the fundamentals of synthetic data, including what synthetic data is and is not, what are the most important concepts related to

synthetic data, ways synthetic data can be used and ways synthetic data can be generated.

- A live coding demonstration in Jupyter notebook to demonstrate several methods in Python for generating synthetic data of various forms.
- A Q&A session to offer participants the opportunity to engage directly with the content and ask questions related to the presentation or live coding demonstration.

[More information and booking](#)

Untapped potential: Linking survey with satellite image data

7 October 2026, 13:00 - 14:00

Online

This free online webinar will introduce the audience to satellite imagery data and their potential application for survey and quantitative social research.

Advances in remote sensing and artificial intelligence are making satellite imagery increasingly accessible for social science, public health and policy research. Imagery-derived datasets can provide measures of urban development, environmental conditions, pollution, prosperity and wellbeing across space and over time. Combined with survey and administrative sources these data can support a wide range of analytical applications.

The webinar will describe satellite imagery data, present a real life case study, and discuss availability and conditions of access. No prior technical knowledge of satellite data will be required.

Presenters: Dr Shaonlee Patranabis, Dr Pierre Walthéry

[More information and booking](#)

Using QGIS to map 2021/22 census data from the UK Data Service

21 Oct 2026

10:00-12:30

Online

A table of numbers is not always the best way to present census data, often we want to visualise the information as a map to help people see patterns quickly.

This free online workshop will focus on the use of the free and open-source cross-platform QGIS GIS application to create maps and other geographical visualisations from 2021/22 census data provided by the UK Data Service.

[More information and booking](#)

Jobs

Organisation: Improvement Service

Post Title: Dashboard Development Project Officer

Salary: £32,102 - £34,246 per year

Hours: 36 hours per week

Location: Hybrid/Livingston

Duration of contract: Fixed term for one year

Job description: The Improvement Service is looking to recruit a Dashboard Development Project Officer to support enhancement of the Community Planning Outcomes Profile (CPOP). The officer will support delivery of a refreshed dashboard tool and improvement of the data flows and content that underpin it.

Application Deadline: research@improvementservice.org.uk, 11 October 2026

Contact for any queries: research@improvementservice.org.uk

[More information can be found here](#)

To submit a job advert to appear in the newsletter or on the LARIA website, please download and complete this [form](#) (Full Corporate and Corporate Members only). You can also post Job Vacancies on the Jobs Board in the LARIA [Members' Area](#).



The next newsletter submission deadline is [Thursday 22nd October](#).

Are you a Corporate or Full Corporate Member?



Local Area Research + Intelligence Association

Your LARIA Corporate Membership entitles you to submit content to the monthly LARIA newsletter, if you have any research, events, job adverts, resources or news which you would us to include please send it to admin@laria.org.uk.

The next newsletter submission deadline is [Thursday 22nd October](#).

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