

Third Sector Research Centre Below the Radar Reference Group Second Meeting 13th September 2010

Key Notes



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Welcome: TSRC and Below the Radar (BTR)
Pete Alcock: Director, Third Sector Research Centre.

The Below the Radar work stream is one of a number of key streams of activity within TSRC. It was established to help us to explore a number of questions about the scope and scale of the third sector and its impact in particular at grassroots and community level. This is an area of research which is of particular interest to one of our funders, the Barrow Cadbury Trust; but also links into the concerns of the Office for Civil Society to understand the range and scale of organised third sector which operates outside of established formal registration and membership bodies. This activity is referred to as taking place 'below the radar' of registered and listed organisational structure, and so we use this terminology here. In practice, however, this covers a wide range of voluntary and community activity, and we will be developing a number of strands of work to explore aspects of these as our research programmes develop. Our working hypothesis is that there is a significant amount of organised activity which is taking place below the radar, and that identification and analysis of this will help policy makers and practitioners to understand this better, and develop appropriate policy initiatives to support and promote it.

One of our first priorities has been to explore current literature and research on BTR organisations and then to seek to define and measure activity which is taking place here. In doing this we have shared our plans with others working on this topic, including the OCS itself and the research programme in the North-East funded by the Northern Rock Foundation. In addition, the results of baseline interviews exploring issues of the distinctiveness of small community based organisations have also been published and are available on the TSRC website.

Another early priority here has been to seek to map all voluntary and community activity taking place within two selected neighbourhoods, which we refer to as micro-mapping. This work is now well developed and we will be publishing some of the findings from it over the next few months. We are also now beginning to explore how to take this work forward, alongside other priorities for other aspects of BTR research.

Announcement: Research into Grass-roots Community Arts Groups

Initial scoping by the Below the Radar work-stream identified a lack of research into, and literature on, grass roots community arts activity. Working with the Voluntary Arts Network and the Universities of Exeter and Glamorgan, TSRC had secured a grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to undertake a literature review and organise a national conference on grass roots arts groups and their economic and social contribution to communities. For further details contact Jenny Phillimore (j.a.phillimore@bham.ac.uk) or Angus McCabe (a.j.mccabe@bham.ac.uk).

A report on the outcomes of this research will be available in late 2011.

Open Forum: Below the Radar in a Big Society?

Angus McCabe and Jenny Phillimore

Angus McCabe and Jenny Phillimore summarised the key points in the (circulated) discussion paper: Below the Radar in a Big Society: Reflections on community engagement, empowerment and social action (available at:

<http://tsrc.ac.uk/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=%2bi9xD8ze1%2fk%3d&tabid=732>

The key points included:

- Although the language of community engagement and social action has changed since the election, there is a continuity in policy terms between the Labour and new Coalition policies on, and agendas for, community based organisations
- In terms of the number of small registered/unregistered community groups there is already a 'big society' but:
 - These are often not connected with government – whilst delivering policy objectives (eg promoting social wellbeing, connecting communities etc)
 - The primary purpose and motivators for such groups are not primarily related to Government policies and agendas.

This raises the question of how well understood the motivations for community activity in policy circles. For over a decade there has been an emphasis on active citizenship (now social action) with an underlying assumption that this is 'good for people' and that the drivers for engagement are predominantly altruistic or the desire to contribute to society as a 'good citizen'. This underestimates other key drivers:



- Social; organised leisure activity, organising as 'fun'
- Anger; to bring about change, often in opposition to, or in conflict with, Government policy.
- 'people working to 'our own agendas' rather than those imposed 'top down'.

This raised the issue – will small community based organisations remain 'below the radar in a big society'?



Participants were asked, in four groups, to discuss the implications of 'The Big Society' for:

- Communities
- Practitioners and policy makers working with communities and community groups
- Research

And:

- What are the key questions for the below the radar work-stream as 'Big Society' agendas evolve?

Each idea was recorded using a hexagon. At the end of the exercise (which generated almost 200 ideas), each group was asked to cluster their hexagons together and identify common themes. These 'clusters' were then used to 'make a quilt' of common ideas on metallic whiteboards.

The key themes which emerged from the discussions are summarised over-leaf.



Challenges for: communities

Theme: Equalities and the voice of the disempowered

- Threat to equalities agenda – small local groups may/may not be inclusive
- Is Big Society about who can afford it?
- Risk of strong local voices that harm integration
- Deprived communities may have even less access to expertise with loss of public services thus cannot benefit from new ‘freedoms’
- Rebranding and speaking truth to power
- Getting our voices heard
- Pressures towards volunteers may be positive – high level of skills - or negative – ‘wrong sort’ of volunteers

Theme: Resources and support

- Local philanthropy
- To do more with less

- Use of non-financial assets (human, social...) (how to...)
- Long journeys towards groups in a position to bid...
- Funding for specialist support – your problem
- Challenge of specialist support and sharing rewards of success
- Where is the space to do what we were set up to do? (and resourcing)

Theme: Who owns it / mechanisms

- Bottom up (action) and top down (vision)
- 'Do what you like but here's our list'
- Simultaneous decentralisation and centralisation (not structures in between)
- Who gauges results
- Challenges of results based contracts v benefits of community organisations
- Mutual models and shareholders in own organisations

Theme: How new is it?

- New things 'in', old things 'out' (charities x, society enterprise ☒)
- Prioritising society innovation (out with the old)
- Responding to market pressure (to sell stuff)
- Dealing with symptoms, not roots, causes (structural)

Theme: Public/democratic accountability in public service reform

- Changes in service provider may be invisible at grassroots so accountability opaque
- Fragmentation of community services makes accountability to local people more difficult

Theme: How does real conflict/different views get worked out

- A language of cohesion glossing over real conflicts
- Opposition to cuts (or opportunities?)
- How far to embrace 'radicalising' rhetoric – our values?

Challenges for: practitioners and policy makers

Theme: Ideological uncertainty – is it necessary?

- Difference/mismatch between rhetoric and reality
- How much is bullshit/spin?
- Is it the big red herring?
- Failure to understand value of what already exists (by government)
- Ongoing struggle between policy and practitioners
- Ill-defined
- How will Big Society relate to government cutbacks in absence of structures?

Theme: Who benefits?

- Defining community beyond 'place'
- Nimby
- What benefits, who benefits
- Who are 'they' accountable to?
- Bypassing existing structures and approaches
- Inequality – will all communities get equal services?

Theme: Avoiding the structural problems – is bigger change needed?

- Structural problems beyond communities' sphere of influence?
- Avoiding big systematic/structural issues (pursuing 'therapy')
- A language of cohesion glossing over real conflict

Theme: Public sector challenges

- Dual roles for Local Government members and officials (representatives and activists)
- 'Intelligent cuts'? Vacuum/fluid situation for Public Sector and Voluntary and Community Sector infrastructure
- Which public services are closest to 'empowerment' values?
- Government misunderstands society action (often anti-government/anger)
- Which public services are easy to de-regulate?
- Need for independence office of budget responsibility for civil society
- Local Government as commissioners and market makers

Theme: Who/where is support?

- Intermediary organisations under threat – will reduce cross-agency learning
- How is it supported? How to retain good relations between voluntary and public sectors in face of cuts.
- Fresh starts not 'capacity building'
- No voice and echo 'literacy'
- Consultative, but where do the ideas go? (no clear trajectory)
- Bottom up (action) and top down (vision)

Theme: Can good quality public services be delivered without investment?

- Organisations work on issues of empowerment may be discredited by link between Big Society and cuts
- How to be creative in the centre of cuts and inevitable inward focus/protectiveness of public agencies?
- Loss of quality monitoring mechanism with loss of e.g. NHS and agencies
- Quality of services
- What infrastructure is needed? Who decides?
- Lack of clear deliverables – transparency for government?
- Tribal war for survival/silos
- In what timeframe are results wanted?
- Can change be achieved without investment?

Theme: Who has power?

- Coporatisation
- Need to get legal framework right for right to bid and right to buy
- Exploitations of gap by external big players?
- Is it a real transfer of power to local level?
- Sharing rewards, success and profit

Challenges for: research

Theme: Exploring Big Society as a concept

- New social contract?
- What are Big Society research priorities?

- What is Big Society for?
- Getting voices heard
- Big Society – the emperor’s new clothes?
- In three years time what will be different?
- Cuts now, first aid later – who will support BTR?
- How can Big Society develop without infrastructure?
- Danger of losses and gains with Big Society - stick to generic issues not political labels
- Fundamental role of public economy within Big Society?
- Does Big Society reinforce existing inequalities?

Isolated idea from challenges to research

- What can be learnt from the 1980s political context?

What are the key research questions for the Below the Radar work-stream?

Finally, participants recorded their research questions, observations and ideas for BTR work-stream

- Change and funding resources. How? Which?
- Will challenges change in new world or remain the same
- New risks?
- What are the changes and how long and who?
- Need to reframe existing practice /experience to current rhetoric
- New funding paradigm
- Defining fairness beyond square mile
- Will there be unequal demand/impact on community groups because of loss of infrastructure – public sector
- What sort of support is needed by BTR organisations?
- Track ongoing impact of policy change on BTR groups
- Debt reduction creates new social problems – who responds and how?
- Opportunities at the moment for researchers to influence Big Society agenda

Overlaps in research

- Value of what already exists not recognised/measured?
- How can local groups learn from each other to speed up positive change?

Participant Question: What is a neighbourhood group?

Before the Reference Group meeting, participants were invited to submit questions for discussion/comment. One question was received: What is a neighbourhood group? Comments were recorded on post-its and are presented in the table below.

Neighbourhood: A Dynamic construct =

Change

Elements of

- geography
- people
- numbers
- relationships

- What is the word being used for before defining it?
- Anywhere within a 10 minute walk
- Who for, who benefits
- “organised” for a purpose
- Rural dimension
- School catchment area
- Limiting definition for community

Should ≠ community

Neighbourhood Group

- Who is it for? Who benefits? Who is leading it?
- Does it relate to other groups? Exclusive? Inclusive?
- Neighbourhood – “technical”? “statistical”? “rural”? “school catchment area”
- Definition of activity and group. Is it an organised active – is there a purpose?
- Geographical term
- Anywhere within a 10 minute walk...
- “Your square mile” community

Workshops

After lunch, two workshops were offered, one on emerging research on ‘family trees’ exploring how resources skills and knowledge are gained and transferred in below the radar groups and a second on the below the radar micro-mapping exercise.

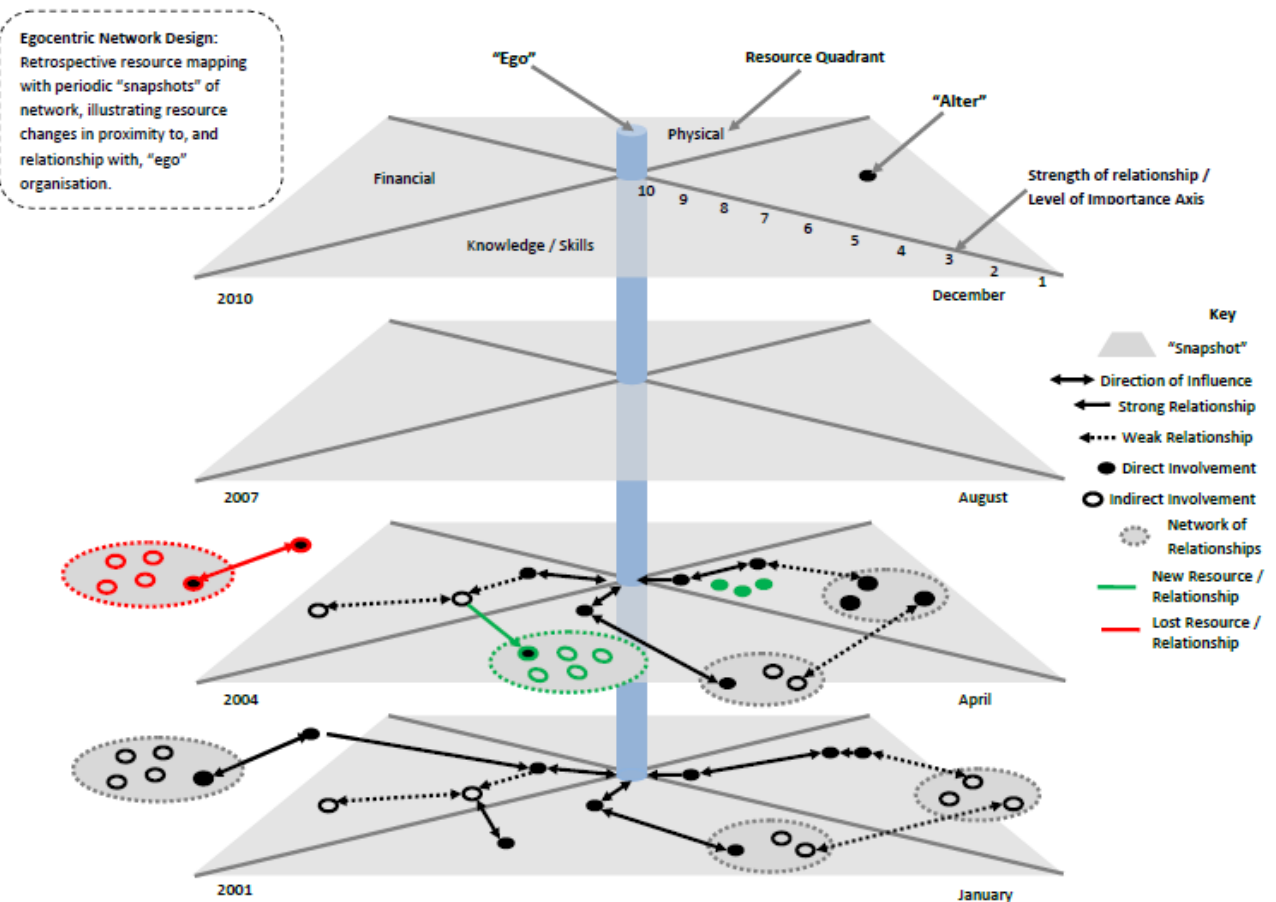
Workshop 1: Below the Radar: Family Trees

Facilitators: Jenny Phillimore/Angus McCabe

Participants: Andy Curtis, Rosie Anderson, Jane Winter, Asif Afridi, Mark Parker, Chris Ford, Rachel Newton, Mike Perry, Rob Macmillan

The BTR team are seeking to develop a research method that will help us to identify the resources that move around the BTR sector and to explore the ways in which they move between individuals and organisations over extended periods of time. Much of the previous work on networking in the third sector has focused formal transfer of resources and learning. We are keen to look at a wider range of resources and to explore how access to resources changes as individuals move around the sector. We also want to question some of the assertions made about resources being lost when an organisation or activity ceases.

This piece of work is at a very early stage. We have completed a literature review on social network theory and are beginning to think of the types of approach that might be suitable. Broadly speaking we have identified two methods. The first, whole-network design, examines sets of inter-related actors that are bound in a social collective, for example a family business. The second, ego-centric design, focuses on one object or actor and their relationships with others (alters) within a non-bounded locality, for example a community organisation. Both methods use nodes and linkages to create sociograms that enable researchers to visualise relationships.



We have designed a model (see above) that seeks to use a longitudinal egocentric design to visualise three dimensions of resource relationships. These are level of importance, direction of influence and strength of relationship. We plan to select a case or ego, for us a BTR organisation or group, interview them to record all the resources involved in the organisation, use closed questioning to quantify the ego-resource relationships and then use a mapping tool to produce a visual representation of the network. We presented our early ideas to the Reference Group and received a great deal of helpful feedback which will enable us to develop our ideas and approach further. We plan to continue working on and reflecting over this method for the next few months and hope to return to the Reference Group for further feedback as our thinking evolves.

A discussion paper on the social networking literature is available at:

<http://tsrc.ac.uk/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=LwCpxuZE8%2fA%3d&tabid=731>

Discussion Key Points: Family Trees

- Need to capture power relationships
- Capturing 'internal' and 'external' relationships
- The charisma/power of 'the founder' and the group/organisation
- How to capture different network perspectives within/outwith organisations
- Thinking through models of society capital "critically"
- Issues of resource disputes within/between organisations
- Issues of memory recall and "what difference" the knowledge/skills/resources made
- Interrogate 'what is a resource'?
- What will the impact of the research on individuals/organisations
- Researchers as a 'resource' to groups
- Recording the impact of the research process on group/organisation
- Is there something distinctive re BTR 'networks' – can networks in BTR organisations be compared with 'private sector' (the arms trade)
- Values that 'underpin' networks and motives
- Capturing multiple motivations/functions of individuals/groups
- How to ensure consistency across case studies?
- Unpicking 'family' in BTR networks
- Assessing different stories of 'what happened' especially where there is/has been conflict
- Use researchers as 'guinea pigs' for the network research
- Networks as people like ourselves – what are the impacts/implications of this
- Using the likelihood – outcome stars models? Networks 'across difference' – class/race etc.
- Issues of personal and cultural identity
- Thinking about the 'roots' of networks
- Capturing the 'start up' of a BTR/social enterprise/community organisation
- Look at literature on happiness and well-being
- Capturing why things happen not just how and when

Workshop 2: Below the Radar: Micro-mapping

Facilitator: Andri Soteri-Proctor

**Participants: Jayne Humm, Nick Ockenden, Sobrina Edwards, Debbie Pippard, Neil Smith
Nick Beddow, Sioned Churchill, Randi Baden, Naomi Landau**

By outlining the previous government's approach towards finding 'below the radar' organisations, the rationale for adopting a complementary and alternative approach to find 'unregistered' third sector activities and groups was discussed in the workshop. This drew on some of the work from the micro-mapping project within TSRC's work stream. Using early findings, there were several illustrations on different types of unregistered groups and activities that are out there; including: those that operate at regional level, smaller self-help group and examples of activities and groups that have been in existence for several decades. Following from this, there was much discussion in the workshop guided by three questions:

What might count as a neighbourhood groups?

Whether there is any value in mapping this part of the 'unknown' sector?

Whether any of these early findings might be relevant to policy?

Value of micro-mapping for policy:

- Opportunity to engage adversarially →
- Understanding the dynamics of the community you serve; rather than fit in the box...
- Opportunity to redefine some of the political structures, e.g. more grass-root engagement to understand what directly affects them/their approach: (* mapping page 2)
- Perpetuating the usual way?
Policy = constructed/reconstructed through participation
- Through community (* ? mapping page 2)

What counts as a neighbourhood group?

- Participatory → for them to participate and identify their own boundaries, health of organisation
...more contribution to the organisations
↓ ↓
Self-defining, for example, their neighbourhood
- Selecting smaller groups methodology (* mapping page 4)
- Community centre → the physical space...
- Micro → what they get out of it?
- Day to day lives → ...why/when need each other

Where to now?

- Radar reset at ground level...
* repetition?

- Individual active citizens – and where they fit in (SNA? * mapping page 3)
- Pointers of sources for useful information?
- Drawing out some of the characteristics...
 - Analysis of the groups...
- Unpicking existing knowledge, influence and understanding (? * mapping page 3)
- Build on body of literature on this – conditions that this flowers in?
- Who are the power brokers in these communities
- Quantifying the success/size of input and identify functions/leaders?

“Below the radar” in real times: early findings from the qualitative longitudinal study
Facilitators: Rob Macmillan and Andri Soteri Proctor

Rob and Andri gave a brief presentation on ‘Real Times’, TSRC’s qualitative longitudinal research programme, focusing particularly on case studies of interest to the ‘below the radar’ work stream. Rob summarised the study’s overall purpose and rationale, before outlining the main research questions and study design. Rob and Andri then discussed some ‘remarkable things’ emerging from the first wave of fieldwork in four of the case studies. This was followed by small group discussion in the reference group on the question:

Given the opportunity to examine small, informal and grassroots third sector activities longitudinally, what aspects, issues and concerns might be worth exploring over time as the ‘Real Times’ study unfolds?

‘Below the radar’ in real times: summary/background - early findings from the qualitative longitudinal study

Rob Macmillan, University of Birmingham

1. About ‘Real Times’

TSRC has been developing a qualitative longitudinal study of third sector organisations, called ‘Real Times’. The research framework involved in the study is summarised below:

The purpose of ‘Real Times’: to understand *how third sector activity operates in practice over time.*

- what *happens* within third sector organisations over time and why
- what *matters* to third sector organisations over time and why, and
- how might we *understand continuity and change* in third sector activity

Overarching research questions:

1. *Fortunes*: What influences the fortunes of third sector organisations? (or, how do third sector organisations ‘get on’?)
2. *Strategies*: How do third sector organisations regard and negotiate the environments in which they operate? (or, how do third sector organisations ‘go on’?)

3. *Challenges*: What challenges do third sector organisations face and how do they respond? (how do third sector organisations ‘get by’?)
4. *Performance*: How is the ‘performance’ of third sector organisations understood by different stakeholders? (are third sector organisations any good?)

Fortunes hints at significant concerns for third sector organisations, and for the sector as a whole, of survival, sustainability, fragility, resilience, and the extent to which these may be related to internal aspects of organisations, external environment, and their interaction. *Strategies* focuses on how third sector organisations view and respond to the complex multi-layered contexts in which they operate, and through which they ‘travel’. *Challenges* examines what kinds of issues, concerns and problems third sector organisations encounter (whether they recognise or understand them or not), and how they respond using perhaps both internal resources and external expert support. Finally, *Performance* looks at the value of third sector organisations and addresses the kinds of judgement third sector organisations and others make about what they do, how they work, and for them and others, ‘what is success?’

These four dimensions for overarching research questions are ‘anchoring points’ rather than an exhaustive list of concerns. A wide range of other questions will be addressed. Because ‘Real Times’ is a longitudinal study, supplementary questions are also posed around temporality: whether, how and why issues around fortunes, strategies, challenges and performance might change over time. In contrast to ‘cross-sectional’ or snapshot perspectives on the third sector, ‘Real Times’ provides an opportunity to explore the dynamics of third sector activity, and in effect, to find out ‘what happens next?’

2. Research design and structure

‘Real Times’ involves research with case studies over an initial period of 3-4 years. The study has three key features.

- i. although for shorthand the ‘cases’ are described as organisations, they are strictly speaking different forms of organised third sector activity, selected to exhibit diversity of organisation and activity, based on, for example, organisation size, age, function/policy field, and the setting in which cases operate.
- ii. the sample involves a ‘tiered’ relational structure, with cases studied at two levels: sixteen ‘core’ case studies and for each, in most cases, up to three related ‘complementary’ case studies. The aim is to use this structure to examine inter-organisational relationships over time.
- iii. the study envisages six waves of fieldwork for ‘core’ cases, scheduled to take place every six months in the Spring and Autumn of 2010, 2011 and 2012. Over the same period three waves of less intense fieldwork are envisaged for the ‘complementary’ case studies. The fieldwork strategy combines ‘hanging out’ (observations), ‘asking questions’ (interviews) and ‘reading the papers’ (documentation produced by and about the cases).

3. 'Real Times' and 'Below the radar'

Four of the sixteen core case studies are designed specifically to inform the 'Below the radar' work stream. Here the focus is primarily on a setting around which a range of third sector activities take place, rather than on a single organisation. The four cases include two urban hubs and two small rural villages:

- A community centre in a deprived urban area in the North of England
- A resource centre serving a multi-cultural community in the Midlands
- A relatively affluent village in the South West of England
- A relatively deprived village in the North of England.

In the recently completed first wave of fieldwork we have been exploring these settings and trying to gain a sense of the range of activities which are undertaken within and through them.

4. For discussion

The presentation will provide an outline description of the case studies along with some insights from the first fieldwork wave.

We hope the discussion around this can help inform subsequent waves of fieldwork. In advance of the reference group meeting, therefore, it would be greatly appreciated if you could give some thought to the following discussion question:

Given the opportunity to examine small, informal and grassroots third sector activities longitudinally, what aspects, issues and concerns might be worth exploring over time as the 'Real Times' study unfolds?

Discussion Points: Real Times Session

- At what point do groups appear on someone's radar? And why?
- At what point does - succession kick in? (needed?) and how do you plan for that?
- Identify the critical junctures of the life cycle of the groups
- Observe the points of realisation of need to change within groups
- Change from original (* real times page 1) to adapt to outside factors – i.e. funding, support... the radar they are on
- Does the research "change" the group (groups/activity)...
- Is there a longitudinal study around groups/activity that is "NOT" on anyone's radar?
- The effect of context changes
- Experience of big society policy
- Impact of public funding constraints – reduced resources or increased demands
- Responses to funding constraints

- Effect of other policies (e.g. equality policy)
- Impact of organisations over time
- Views about the role of the society
- Where do VCO get support from? Role of local authorities?
- How are organisations/groups making partnerships/responding to opportunities in this new environment?
- How do they position themselves?
- Conflicts between groups

Issues to explore

- Why some places have higher social capacity
- How do groups change from informal to more formalised networks (and vice versa)
- Where do they get support
- Monitor the role of local authorities (as their priorities change)
- Crunch points
 - How groups identify crunch points
 - How organisations make decisions
- Is scaling up the answer to small groups in the long term
- Volunteer management
 - What is unique to a volunteer-led group
 - Recruitment and retention
 - Succession
 - Sustainability/long-term
 - What works in these groups
- Impact of policy changes over time
- Impact of demographic changes (e.g. on people retiring later, lack of young people)
 - Why?
- Why groups come to an end?
 - Reaching original objectives
 - What happens to the participants
- Q: What happens if one of the cases collapses/pulls out?

Additional Issues

- Are the old guard open to new people/ideas?
- Why do volunteers 'burn out'?
- 2-3 years not long enough
- How/is there a transfer of power to younger/next generation
- How will the organisations respond to the changing policy context?
- Baseline of people involved now to measure change/unemployment? (* real times page 4)
- Mapping relationships
 - How well connected are they?
 - Horizontal and vertical
 - Have their beneficiaries changed? (* real times page 4 – not sure this goes here)

- Role of statutory agencies
- Do the issues presented/advice promoted change over time
- Response to new migrant communities
- Migration – both internal and external
 - People moving out of cities
 - Housing benefit changes
- How far did w/c institutions such as trade unions help people get involved?

Concluding Remarks

Thank you, on behalf of the Below the Radar team and the wider TSRC for your contribution to the Reference Group and we hope these notes are an accurate reflection of the quality of debate throughout the day. For 'Below the radar' those discussions have made a difference. For example:

- We will be re-drafting the Below the Radar Discussion Paper into a full Working Paper and including the key themes generated from the hexagons exercise in this revised report
- In terms of the 'Family Trees' project exploring the transfer of resources within and between small community groups, we will be rethinking not only the methodology but also how information on complex social networks can be presented in an accessible and understandable format. There will be further updates as this work progresses
- For 'Real Times' the workshop discussions generated an excellent array of thoughts and questions which we can take with us into subsequent waves of fieldwork. We'll be reporting back regularly to the reference group and others as the study progresses, and hope to be in a position to address many of the questions raised.
- It was helpful for the micro-mapping research to hear about your views and ideas on the usefulness of micro-mapping and how the Below the Radar work stream could build on this with questions for the future. As we close this phase of the micro-mapping, your comments will help us to reflect how we go forward with this and other work.

We really appreciate the time given to the Below the Radar Reference Group and the contribution this makes to the development of our thinking and work programmes.

Participants

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