

Briefing Paper 1

Research Approach and Strategy of TSRC

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The Centre

The Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) is an ESRC research centre. It is a collaborative venture between the ESRC, the Office of the Third Sector (OTS) and the Barrow Cadbury Trust, who jointly are funding its research activity for five years initially from 2008 to 2013. The centre was established after some considerable discussion and debate about the need to strengthen the research base on the third sector in the UK, and prior to the formal commissioning process a Scoping Report was prepared for the OTS outlining the key priorities for research and listing some of the research questions that the centre would be expected to explore.

The centre itself was commissioned by the ESRC following a competitive bidding process and the deliberations of a large Commissioning Panel comprised of leading academics and representatives of the policymaking and practice communities.

The Commissioning Panel also selected the linked Capacity Building Clusters (CBC) at the same time, although in practice only two CBCs were initially commissioned in 2008, with the third commissioned a year later in 2009 by a revised panel. The decision to commission TSRC was therefore based on an extensive and detailed plan for research outlined by the bidders and based on the Scoping Report and commissioning guidelines. The successful bid from Birmingham and Southampton outlined a

wide-ranging programme of research based in the two institutions, with additional contributions on social enterprise from Middlesex and theoretical analysis from Jeremy Kendall at Kent. A summary of these research programmes is also available on the website.

TSRC has been commissioned therefore to carry out an agreed programme of research with an agreed resource base (including staffing) to deliver this. The centre is not in a position to commission additional research from other providers. However, TSRC is committed to supporting the expansion of research on the sector and will work, where appropriate with other partners, to respond to opportunities to engage in additional funded research where these fall within the broad academic expertise of the centre. A number of other such

projects are already underway and information about these can be found on the website.

At the centre of discussion about the need for a new UK research centre on the third sector, and a key feature of the commissioning process, was recognition of the need for an improved academic research base on the sector.

Academic research

There is a vibrant and supportive academic research community on the sector in the UK, co-ordinated by the Voluntary Sector Studies Network (VSSN). VSSN helps to promote academic research, for instance through annual conferences and seminars and through its editorial management of a new academic journal, *Voluntary Sector Review*. The Director and other academics in TSRC are all active members of VSSN. VSSN is a network co-ordinating and promoting

research, however; it is not a centre able to develop and deliver a co-ordinated research program. Such centres do exist in the US and in some countries in continental Europe. TSRC is in part a response to the need for such a centre in the UK. TSRC will work closely with VSSN and its members to promote academic research on the sector across the UK.

Much of the existing third sector research had been funded by policy makers or practitioners to explore and assess the effectiveness of current policies and practices in the sector. Much of this is 'evaluation research', focused on independent evaluation of particular activities or initiatives. This work is useful and important for policy and practice, and can help to inform academic understanding. But it is inevitably limited in its scope and wider applicability. Independent academic research has been taking place too, of course, but much of this has also been relatively small scale and often time limited.

A key argument for establishing the centre was therefore the need for a wide-ranging, independent and long term programme of research and analysis. This is what TSRC has been commissioned to provide, and this is what the research programmes of the centre focus on.

First there is a need to gather together what we know from existing research, to identify strengths and gaps in this and to make it available in a more systematic form to academics, policy makers, practitioners and other research users with an interest in the sector. TSRC's first priority is therefore a review of existing evidence and an ongoing commitment to monitor this and make it available to users.

Second it is essential that the Centre's research is informed by a strong theoretical and conceptual analysis of the sector and the policy environment within which it is situated. Theoretical analysis of the sector is not well developed in the UK, in part because of the applied focus of much existing research.

TSRC must contribute to ensuring that difficult theoretical issues are articulated and explored – not the least what is perhaps the most controversial question of all: what is the third sector? Critical understanding of the policy environment it also essential, for it determines much of what happens within in the sector and is the focus of much debate by academics and practitioners. TSRC is co-funded by the OTS which is responsible for developing and delivering policy in England. The Centre's research will help to inform policy development by OTS, but it will also make that policy process itself the subject of critical review, for instance an early priority will be work to analyse the impact of the recession on the policy process.

Third we need to establish a comprehensive and robust database on the sector. One of the problems facing much previous research and policy making has been the lack of reliable data about the size, shape, structure and dynamics of the sector. Robust data is the core of any academic research endeavour, and it is a core aim of TSRC to acquire such data, to interrogate and analyse it, and to

make key features and findings available to research users. In time the Centre's aim is to make access to data sources available also, providing protocols on ownership and anonymity can be met. This will include quantitative data, where Southampton will be providing the lead. We will use the Guidestar database and other sources of statistics on the sector to establish a comprehensive quantitative picture of the

third sector in the UK, and will maintain and enhance this over the course of the Centre to permit the longitudinal analysis of changes over time. Previous research has not had the resource base to establish such extensive data nor to engage in significant analysis of temporal change. The Centre will also develop a new and extensive qualitative database, based on a large and diverse sample of case studies of third sector organisations, led by Birmingham. These will be recruited to represent the wide ranging diversity of third sector activity and will be

We do not want to 're-invent the wheel'; but equally a review of what we know will help us to establish what we do not know – or perhaps what we do not understand. We do need to know 'what works', but we also need to understand who decides 'what matters'.

tracked over four years initially. This will provide a unique resource of qualitative data and will be a major methodological innovation in research on voluntary action. The longitudinal dimension of this and the quantitative databases will be a key feature of TSRC research, providing for the first time robust dynamic analysis of change both across the sector and within individual organisations. These databases will be a major contribution to our empirical knowledge of the third sector; but they will also be a resource for addressing a range of research questions about how the sector operates and what its impact is.

The **fourth** area of research for TSRC is therefore analysis of the impact of the sector. This is potentially an extensive, if not infinite, focus for research, and inevitably therefore the scope of research activity will be limited to some extent; and it is here where the evidence review and the engagement with stakeholders (discussed below) can be important in helping to identify appropriate and feasible research questions. However, there were clear questions identified in the Scoping Report and the commissioning process, and the Centre's programmes include some key streams of activity to respond to these priorities. These research streams will have some flexibility to respond to changing priorities of policy and practice, and so not all aspects of our work can be covered in this summary. Key streams are underway, however, and these include :

- **Social enterprise**, led by Fergus Lyon at Middlesex, and exploring the extent to which social enterprise comprises a distinct part of the third sector with a distinct contribution to make.
- **Service delivery**, exploring in particular (though not exclusively) the expanding role of third sector organisations in the delivery of public services with public resources. This is a broad field where some existing research has already been undertaken. The focus of TSRC will therefore include some key areas of service delivery including, health and social care, housing, and criminal justice.

We will also deploy sophisticated statistical techniques to provide a fuller understanding of patterns and dynamics of the sector. Only a large centre resourced over a significant time period could provide this longitudinal approach.

- **Economic analysis**, seeking to use economic models and measures to assess the key features of the sector and the contribution it makes to the economy and society. This will include analysis of employment and employment trends in the sector. It will also be developed collaboratively with related research in the Centre for Market and Public Organisation (CMPO) at University of Bristol.

- **Below the radar**, which is the phrase we are using to describe the potentially wide range of voluntary and community activity which is not captured by existing databases, public registrations or major umbrella organisations. This will include the work of small and community based organisations working within vulnerable and marginalised communities, which is a particular concern of the Barrow Cadbury Trust.

- **Black and minority ethnic (BME) sector**, we will undertake mapping and qualitative analysis to determine the extent to which there is a distinct BME subsector with a particular focus on policy or practice.

Advice and engagement

The research programmes of TSRC are thus set by the need to develop a robust and extensive theoretical and empirical understanding of the third sector, and to make the findings from this available to a wide range of research users. We are engaged in academic research and our key priority here is to ensure that our work is theoretically informed and empirically robust. We also want to ensure that this provides a resource for other academics and for policy makers and practitioners. It is important therefore that

We need to know what are the key questions which policy makers and practitioners want research evidence on and what forms of evidence they think would be most useful to them to address these.

our activity is carefully and rigorously constructed.

Nevertheless it is also important that it is informed by the needs and concerns of policy makers and practitioners. It is for this reason that we have established an Advisory Board to oversee our research strategy, with representatives from sector agencies, academic research and policy providers. We have also established Reference Groups linked to each of our major streams of research, including a wider range of specialist advisors. These will meet regularly with researchers in these streams, and will work 'virtually' to advise and comment on our research.

We also have established a Knowledge Exchange Team, based within NCVO in London, to ensure that our research engages with the widest range of stakeholders and research users from policy and practice, and in particular that our findings and analysis are made available and accessible to all.

Devolved administrations

The TSRC is a UK research Centre and our research and analysis will focus on the whole of the UK, although the OTS who co-fund the centre are an English government department. We will ensure that our policy analysis and quantitative data explore the different dimensions of third sector policy and activity across the four nations of the UK. Our qualitative work will be focused in England only however.

We will establish separate Reference Groups to advise on the different context and structure of the third sector in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We will also discuss with the devolved administrations the scope for additional funding to undertake separate work in each of these countries, either to provide comparative analysis to research already underway in England or to meet the specific needs of policy makers or practitioners in the devolved administrations. We have recruited academic leads in each country, who will act as associate directors for

the additional research activity developed through TSRC in these countries, and will co-ordinate the work of academic researchers in each country to deliver this.

Looking forward...

The long term aim for TSRC is to establish a permanent centre for academic research on the third sector in the UK. We want to be able to maintain our core data gathering and analysis as a sustainable resource for all research users. Over time we will also be able to develop analysis to address a wider range of developing research questions. This will also include securing funding for additional, and more applied research which can draw on TSRC data and expertise to meet the needs of different policy and practice agencies and research communities – indeed we are already engaged in a number of separately funded projects to do this, details of which will be available on the website in due course.

We are also committed to promoting and supporting the building of capacity for research with, on and for the sector. In part this will be achieved by our joint work with the three Capacity Building Clusters. In part it will be achieved through our collaboration with related ESRC or OTS investments, notably the Centre for Charitable Giving and Philanthropy (CGAP) and the Centre for Market and Public Organisation (CMPO). But in part it will also be a feature of our activity within the Centre to promote and support the work of other researchers both in the academic and practice communities, for instance, through online advice, training courses, and honorary and visiting fellowship programmes.

Finally we are concerned to ensure that our research has a real impact on policy and practice. We will facilitate engagement and dissemination, in particular through the work of our Knowledge and Exchange Team; but we will also use this engagement to develop evaluation of the impact of our research over time. We want to ensure that a sustainable research centre is also a valuable and influential one.

This paper is part of the Third Sector Research Centre – Briefing Paper Series see www.tsrc.ac.uk for more details and a copy of the full Working Paper 1.

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