

Briefing Paper 87

All Change? Surviving 'below the radar': community groups and activities in a Big Society

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Introduction

Over late 2009 and early 2010 the Below the Radar work stream at the Third Sector Research Centre undertook a range of interviews with national network groups, practitioners and academics to explore the role and nature of small community groups (Phillimore and McCabe: 2010). These sessions also examined the contexts in which 'below the radar' groups became established and their perceived role in the delivery of Government policy. Following the general election in May 2010, further work involving workshops, focus groups and seminars explored the impact of the change in administration on community groups and activities. At this point, prior to the implementation of the Localism Act and the Open Public Services White Paper, the conclusion was that, whilst the emergency budget of June 2010, and subsequent Spending Review in October, raised concerns over funding for the voluntary sector as a whole and community groups in particular, it was 'too early to tell' what the full impact of change might be.

The following briefing paper draws on a second round of interviews and focus group activity between February 2011 and January 2012 to essentially explore 'Big Society one

year on': how has policy towards 'community' changed? What have been the impacts of change? How have below the radar groups and community sector network organisations responded? What might be the implications of current trends for the future?

Methods

The findings presented draw on the growing body of practitioner and academic literature on 'Big Society' and on in depth interviews with 24 representatives from 22 network organisations, development agencies, policy makers and academics with different areas of expertise in the community sector. In an attempt to ensure consistency, interviews as far as possible replicated those undertaken in 2009/10 and were supplemented by individual interviews with 15 below the radar community groups as well as focus groups and workshops with 98 activists, practitioners, policy makers and academics.

All change: community policy in context

Although there have been continuities between the current Government and New Labour (with for example, localism bearing more than a passing resemblance to 'Communities in Control' (2008) from 2010 onwards, it has been possible to identify two

very different debates on community and community groups. Firstly there was the transformational language of the Coalition Government. The 'Big Society' was about genuine community 'empowerment... freedom...and responsibility' (David Cameron: 19th July 2010). It was about social action rather than community development as a tool for governance and consultation (Home Office: 2011). It was about the ending of imposed 'top down diktats from Whitehall',¹ creating 'the UK's biggest mutual to which all citizens will be able to belong'² and fundamentally changing the relationship between communities, individual citizens and the State.

On the other hand, the concept of a 'Big Society' was met with a degree of scepticism, if not cynicism. The term was argued to be little more than an empty policy strap-line which, like 'Back to Basics' and the 'Cones Hotline' before, would be short lived (McCabe: 2011). Commentators have argued it lacked substance, bore little relevance to people's lived experience, was not grounded in the realities of community and was little more than a smokescreen for public spending cuts.

For all that scepticism 'Big Society' is still with us and the 'three pillars' for implementation in place: The Localism Act, the Open Public Services White paper and the Community Organiser's Programme.

Responding to the policy environment

There has been no one response to the Big Society agenda and policy change over the last year to 18 months. Rather it is possible

¹ Frances Maude and Nick Hurd 12th November 2010: Open Letter to the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors, Cabinet Office.

² www.thebigsociety.co.uk/square-mile.html

to identify five differing standpoints. There are those who welcome the current direction of travel; for them localism offers the opportunity of a real transfer of power to communities. The *Open Public Services White Paper* could, they think, in the medium to longer term, enable even small community groups to expand as Big Society recognises the value and importance of grass roots activity. However, other responses include:

- Pragmatism. Whatever the underlying view of the Big Society is, voluntary and community groups need to adapt to the new environment.
- Nuanced interpretations: 'Big Society' could stimulate different forms of social action – from campaigning to prevent the closure of libraries to volunteering as a way of keeping them open.
- Scepticism and opposition: Big Society is 'ideological window dressing' (Umbrella Organisation Interview).
- Lack of concern as the whole agenda is seen as an irrelevance: community groups are the pre-existing, but largely unrecognised, Big Society.

If, then, a unified voice has not emerged across the sector, what has been the impact of current policies on community groups and activities?

Policy Impact: Surviving 'Below the Radar'

Deficit reduction strategies, cuts, have exercised national and local voluntary organisations, sector journals and indeed the mainstream media.³ Accurate data is, however hard to come by as self-reported monitoring (such as

³ See for example: The Guardian, 2/8/2011: Charities fight for survival as funds slashed. Birmingham Evening Mail. 3/8/2011: Bleak future for groups offering vital aid: £15 million cut from Charities.

www.voluntarysectorcuts.org) and freedom of enquiry request information tends to be incomplete and/or conflates cuts to mainstream Local Authority grants and contracts with the ending of specific funding streams such as *Future Jobs Fund* and the *Working Neighbourhoods Fund*. There has certainly been a decline, nationally (over 2011 at least) in employment in the sector for the first time in over 20 years and local surveys report lost income and redundancies alongside an increasing demand for services. Whilst some argue that the cuts have fallen disproportionately on, for example, BME and women's groups, others suggest that the most affected are poor communities 'across the board'. The research, however has focus on the formal voluntary sector with paid staff. Much less is known about the impact of change on small, below the radar' community groups without employees. What, then, has been the impact of the current policy and fiscal environment?

For some, as yet, there has been no impact: arts and sports groups, for example, who generate their own income without external grants. For others, however, the picture is more complex than 'the cuts' alone. A number of factors have come into play.

Time and timing: One outcome of the recession had been increased uncertainty about job security for community activists in employment and increased work-loads. This limited their personal time for voluntary activity: 'If I'm still in the office at 8, I can't make the meeting that starts at 7' (Faith Group Interview). Time limits in raising capital for asset transfer activity also exclude small groups.

Places and spaces: the increasing difficulty in accessing free or affordable meeting places.

Support services: the loss of access to pro-bono advice from either Local Authorities or Voluntary Sector infrastructure bodies.

This complex multiplier effect, which has also been described as compound disadvantage, are illustrated in the following Case Study.

Case Study: Crumley Pensioners Group

Crumley Pensioners is a long established group which meets weekly at the local library. Its activities include social events and invited speakers. Members come from a variety of surrounding villages. Public transport links are poor and they have received a grant for community transport to carry people to their meetings. The group has been highlighted in the local press as important in tackling the isolation felt by older people in rural communities.

Crumley Pensioners recently lost their community transport grant of £500 per annum. They approached the Rural Community Council's (RCC) Development Worker who informed them that the RCC no longer had the capacity to support them in applying for other funding due to reductions in its own budget. They had previously received 'pro bono' advice from the Local Authority but were told that this was no longer available due to re-structuring. The library is also threatened with closure. As part of its survival strategy it is exploring income generation and has told the group they will need to pay a commercial rate (£1,000 a year) for the room they previously used on a grace and favour basis.

The group is currently considering its own future. Whilst members want to maintain weekly meetings their view is that it is not feasible for members to cover their own travel costs as well as pay for the rental of space at the library.

Conclusions: looking to the future

The findings reinforce Taylor's (2011) argument that 'in local ecologies where organisations are interdependent, cuts to one part of the sector – as well as to the public sector itself – can have significant ripple effects'.⁴

Further delivering 'Big Society', Localism and Open Public Services is predicated on two assumptions. Firstly, that community groups will 'scale up' to take on public services. At this point in time, the research found no evidence of their desire to take on public service delivery. Rather they were motivated by local interests in the issues directly affecting their community: offering services for and with the public – but not public services.

Secondly, there is an ever expandable number of volunteers and active citizens if only agencies could, more effectively, tap into 'willing localists'. Again the evidence suggests there is a civic core, rather than an inexhaustible number, of activists. Some below the radar groups were struggling to maintain existing members, let alone recruit new volunteers. So some groups may be thriving. Others are merely surviving – or dying.⁵

⁴ Taylor, M. (2011) Community organising and the Big Society: is Saul Alinsky turning in his grave? *Voluntary Sector Review* – Vol.2 no 2. pp259-66.

But what about the longer term future? Crystal ball gazing in the community sector is always dangerous. After all, the predicted demise of charity and voluntary action following the creation of the Welfare State, has proved somewhat exaggerated. However, commentators on both the left and right argue that austerity and the Big Society (however 'badged') are here for the foreseeable future. The 'Big State' is part of the problem – not the solution to inequality. Looking to the future is therefore important. But rather than predict what will happen it may be important to pose three questions to inform future research:

- Will there be a growing divide, both within the third sector and wider society between the 'have's and the have not's'? Is the concept of equality (or 'fairness') no longer an important policy driver?
- Is community activism an expandable resource and if so what form will it take – formal volunteering or direct social action?
- Will communities and community groups engage in and try to influence the direction of policy or will they turn inwards, focus on survival and disengage from political discourses that bear little resemblance to people's lived experiences?

⁵ Davidson, E. and Packman, C. (2012) *Surviving, Thriving or Dying: Resilience in small community groups in the North West of England*. Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester.



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