

Unfolding tales of voluntary action

One 'Divine intervention...'

Case study 'Larch' – a relatively deprived village in the north of England, mid-2010

Rob Macmillan
Third Sector Research Centre

February 2014

Unfolding tales of voluntary action

One

‘Divine intervention...’

Case study ‘Larch’ – a relatively deprived village in the north of England, mid-2010.

In which, Sarah, a community activist, calls for divine intervention to boost the local Heritage Centre; and a serendipitous encounter between a resident and a social entrepreneur sets the ball rolling on a new social venture.

Key themes

- Coalfields historical legacies, including the recent experience of community regeneration.
- The struggles of a small heritage group, the progress of a community shop and the serendipitous start of a new social venture.
- Reproducing community activity over time: worries around succession and community activity falling on narrow, ageing shoulders.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Pete Alcock, Kahryn Hughes and Veronique Jochum for comments on an earlier version of this paper.

This paper, the first in a series called ‘Unfolding tales of voluntary action’, draws on data generated in the ‘Real Times’ qualitative longitudinal study of third sector organisations and activities. It has been produced in collaboration with the ESRC-funded [Changing Landscapes for the Third Sector](#) Knowledge Exchange project with the University of Leeds. For further information about the Real Times study, see TSRC Working Paper 56 (Macmillan 2011).

The next instalment in the series will look at organisational crisis in Real Times case study ‘Hawthorn’, a family support project in the north of England.

Divine intervention

The train rattles out of the city, slowly advancing northwards through hinterland stations. The landscape is changing, from urban, through the suburbs to wider skies and fields. But this is an industrial rural landscape. Young silver birch trees planted on a low and evidently man-made hill give the game away: a first ray of light illuminating the gloom. We're passing by and through reclaimed land. The smoothed over and gently sloping landscape hints at a place with a past, peeking through to the present. The train is heading out to the former coalfields.

Twenty minutes later we exit at 'Larch'¹, a relatively small ex-mining village, and make our way passed CCTV cameras into the village, the first of many research visits over the next few years. Today, a warm summer's day in 2010, it's the AGM of the Larch Heritage Group (LHG). Filing into the vaulted ceiling of the former Methodist chapel, refurbished some time ago as a Heritage Centre through Lottery and regeneration funding, we make a small group sitting expectantly along the pews. The light through the windows shines on dust motes in the air. Our chair is Malcolm, a local historian in his 70s, and his soft northern lilt takes us through the formal proceedings: *"Good morning, everyone. Sitting here I feel I should be preaching to you!"*

The centre is kept open by a small group of committed volunteers – a core group of three, supported at fleeting times by others: *"Anybody interested in joining us would be more than welcome.... if not we'll just keep chatting to ourselves, but it would be nice to have others to talk to for a change..."* The centre contains a permanent exhibition of historical artefacts, documents and photographs collected over many years, about the village and the local mining industry. The centre undertakes family history work, organises guided heritage walks and hosts a youth club one evening a week. Malcolm ended his review of the year by offering thanks *"to one particular person for all her hard work"*. It was obvious that he was talking about Sarah, fellow volunteer and group secretary sitting alongside him. She stopped writing the minutes and was looking a little embarrassed, but leaned in slightly towards him as he continued: *"She works tirelessly for the association, and for the village. Thank you very, very much Sarah. I don't know where the village would be without her. She's an angel. God bless you"*. People were nodding in appreciation.

Then it was Sarah's turn on the agenda, to provide the finance report. It's a small organisation, so the accounts are fairly straightforward, apart from a complicated story of paying off electricity arrears in instalments. The significance of this only becomes apparent some months ahead. Because the repayments now have to be quicker than originally agreed, LHG are allowing some rent arrears to build up: *"As a result there's a big deficit in the account, and once that's gone we*

will have to start paying the lease. There's always something to keep you on your toes", she concluded rather cheerily.

Meanwhile, Malcolm spoke of the group's everyday fundraising activities: raffles and selling postcards, pens, books and pamphlets, DVDs, and providing refreshments for the heritage walkers. Sarah was asked to describe two larger funding bids, both involving the employment of paid staff and designed to inject more life into the centre. One has already been submitted to the Big Lottery Fund for the development of the youth club, and the other for European funding to develop the tourism potential of the Heritage Centre itself is in progress:¹

"We've got through the pre-application stage. This is a bonus, but there's no guarantee. They put lots of hoops that you have to jump through like you've never seen...It needs to be in by the beginning of July, so there's not much time, but I am getting help with it".

By help Sarah meant a funding advisor from a voluntary sector infrastructure organisation nearby, although not the most local one. They were a bit pessimistic about their chances. The advisor had said that the bid would more than likely be assessed by *"a load of men in suits who haven't a clue what it's like."*

After 25 minutes of AGM business, Malcolm thanked everybody for attending, invited people to stay for refreshments, and looked like he was drawing the meeting to a close: *"Any questions? No. Well, we'll just keep plodding on"*. There was a pause. Then Sarah held her arms open and looked up to the vaulted ceiling for divine intervention: *"So we offer that prayer up – if you can give us any help that would be appreciated!"*

Larch: background and context

This story calls for detail and background: what's going on here and how does it relate to a wider context of community action, village life and broader socio-economic circumstances? How did it come to be like this, and crucially, what will happen? These are all questions involving reflections about time and the texture of everyday community action. Malcolm, Sarah and others are seemingly plodding along in the present, keeping the past alive, but waiting in anticipation for the outcome of their funding proposals.

¹ 'Larch' is a pseudonym designed to protect the anonymity of the village. All names of individuals, and some minor details in the case study, have also been changed.

Larch is a small, relatively deprived ex-mining area in the north of England, consisting of several linked settlements with a population of around 2000 people. It is located in a mixed urban and rural, but Labour-dominated, district, and forms the most heavily populated part of a wider parish council area. Much of Larch and surrounding villages was developed at the end of the 19th century to accommodate miners at the local colliery which was in operation for about 100 years from the late 19th century. Larch wouldn't claim to be a chocolate box 'pretty' village. The housing mainly consists of small terraces of (ex-coal board) private and social housing, although there are some larger semi-detached and detached houses in particular parts of the village. It has a couple of pubs on the main road, a working men's club, a general store with a post office, a chip shop, a charity shop and café, a surgery, a school and a nursery, as well as a couple of churches. It has a large old village hall, several smaller community buildings and the heritage centre in the refurbished Methodist chapel. The colliery site and spoil heaps were landscaped to create a country park, and the village also has some allotments and a playing field which becomes a cricket pitch in the summer months. You can get to and from Larch via a nearby station and a couple of bus services to the nearest towns and the city to the south.

Following the closure of the mine, the population declined and physically the area deteriorated dramatically over the next decade or so. Eventually Larch became linked to a new push, both locally and nationally, to regenerate blighted former coalfield areas (Coalfields Task Force 1998). This aimed to create a more coordinated approach to coalfield regeneration. A new range of institutions and professionals were engaged to work with local people in regenerating the community (Waddington et al. 2001, Waddington 2004) – the regional development agency, the local council, a regeneration company, housing associations, a local authority community development team, and ring-fenced funding for grassroots community activities through the Coalfields Regeneration Trust established in 1999.

Larch was designated as a 'community regeneration' area by the local council, and new resources would be invested in improving the housing stock (through selective demolition, new housing and refurbishment) and stimulating a range of community and economic activities. At the time community economic development was very much in vogue (Haughton 1999), and in Larch a special community enterprise company was established, involving local people, to help generate new business activity, although it was rather short-lived and a source of conflict over who was actually in control: the residents or the professionals.

The late 1990s and the first decade of the new century can be seen as a period of considerable investment in coalfields' regeneration: new things being established and laid down, and older things being brightened up. From the vantage point of the years following 2010, however, it feels

like the distant past. Or is it? How long is it before we think of things as sufficiently remote in time to consider them 'dated' or 'historical'? The community development activities of this period, any period, always leave some form of legacy, and in various ways this can be seen in subsequent years. For example, the importance of sustained community development is noted in an in-depth longitudinal study of Warsop Vale in the Nottinghamshire coalfield, which argues that progress in community regeneration owed much to the *'painstaking and often enlightened processes of community development and political activism first rooted in the late 1980s'* (Waddington 2004: 23). Understanding how the near and not so near past affects the ongoing present is where the 'Real Times' study picks up the story.

Organising community and voluntary activities in Larch

Larch has a long-standing and active community association. It tends to form the hub through which many projects and initiatives are coordinated. Established in 1998 from the merger of two tenants and residents associations, in 2010 it was responsible for a host of activities, all on the basis of entirely unpaid effort: a community-run charity shop, a small community hall, the heritage group, a minibus, newsletter and website. It seems to have a high profile in the village, and to some extent functions almost like a parish council but without the statutory formalities, although relationships between the parish council and the community association could be better.

The community shop was established 18 months ago using £2,500 set-up funding from the community association, and a below-market rent, but remarkably it had no business support or advice and has no business plan. Turnover continues to grow, the set-up funding has been repaid, and the café seems to work as an informal 'drop-in' space for residents. The shop is open most days in the week and is run by a group of 10 volunteers led by Sarah's husband Graham. Can it continue on its current basis, which relies on a viable ongoing supply of donated goods (to sell in the shop), and unpaid labour (on a rota to staff the shop and cafe)?

There is a general worry about the narrow range of shoulders upon which much community activity in the village rests, in terms of overall organisation and everyday energy. The community association includes a core group of perhaps around 10 people actively involved in a range of community activities, and perhaps three or four who appear to put in substantial amounts of time on a daily basis, including Sarah and Graham. They appear to be part of what is known as the 'civic core' (Mohan and Bulloch 2012), and people note what the impact would be if they stopped being so active. Sarah is Company Secretary for the community association, secretary and active volunteer in the LHG, helps run the youth club, organises weekly bingo nights and is significantly

involved in putting major funding bids together. Graham oversees the community shop, is active on the board of the community association and is a former member of the community enterprise company, as well as organising the minibus, website and newsletter. Both recently retired, they have lived in Larch for a good 30 years, much of which time has included various community roles and positions. They've lived through significant changes in the village, including the aftermath of the loss of the pit, the miners strike, and active involvement in the subsequent regeneration efforts. The current Chair of the community association, Lizzie, suggested that most community activity in Larch is undertaken by a core group who have been active for nearly 15 years and thus gradually getting older. This raises the issues of succession, of how community activities are reproduced in time and are passed on through generations - who will take up the baton of organising community action in the future? Lizzie comments that when they started to get more active and organised they all had brown hair, but now it is mostly grey, and there seems not to be much brown hair coming up behind them.

New shoots?

How do community activities in places like Larch keep going, reproduce and replenish themselves? In Larch we have a range of activities that have been going some time, and some newer ventures such as the 18 month-old community shop. We have an ageing group of active residents, and a regeneration programme coming to an end. In mid-2010, however, another new venture is in discussion – the chance to put to community use a small piece of land purchased at the height of the regeneration programme. In the jargon of community economic development this would be an example of asset-based development. The plan is to lease the land on a peppercorn rent to a couple of young social entrepreneurs from the nearby town who want to establish and run a horticultural social enterprise. Oddly enough it came about through a serendipitous meeting at a funding fair for local voluntary and community organisations between one of the social entrepreneurs, Becky, and Graham from Larch. They were both there to hear of new funding opportunities from the likes of the Big Lottery Fund and the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. A chance intervention from Becky, saying that they have an idea for a project but no land, led Graham to speak up to say 'well, we've got some!'

Thus it was that in Spring 2010, Becky addresses a meeting of the Larch Community Association. Her accent might be seen as rather more 'well spoken' than many Larch residents in the meeting, and certainly not 'from round here'. So she has a task on her hands as an evident 'outsider'. There is an agreement to proceed with the project, but can she win her audience round to the basic idea? She describes the project – a community farm using volunteers and placements

as trainees to grow produce for sale. She holds up a piece of flip chart paper with 11 things to consider over the next few months, including, for example, the terms of the lease, planning permission, securing the site, clearing the land, start-up funding and working as a partnership. She is well prepared and comes across as capable, knowledgeable, enthusiastic and keen to get going. Becky has some considerable community development experience, and it shows. She is open and persuasive, arguably demonstrating great 'social skill' in securing the co-operation and optimistic anticipation of others (Fligstein 2001).

However, during the discussion a little scepticism creeps in from the audience, unclear about the business and organisational model which underpins the project. She is asked: 'who pays for it?' Becky falters slightly, and sounds initially defensive, but then answers more fully. Placements would attract fees from relevant statutory providers, such as through the Job Centre or Probation Service, and eventually this will be supported by sales of produce. The aim is to be self-sustaining rather than dependent on grants. She is pressed on how the organisation will be run and funded, and people seem to be confused when she mentions that it will be a 'community interest company', for the benefit of the community, with Becky and her colleague as Directors rather than having a governing board of trustees as in a charity. She concludes that the aim is to be in control of the venture and develop diverse income streams, but also notes that they will be working for nothing in the beginning as the organisation is established. The next step is to host a meeting of potential partners and stakeholders to build wider interest in the idea.

Looking ahead

A recent think-tank report noted the existence of 'cold spots' of voluntary activity in disadvantaged areas (Centre for Social Justice 2013: 63). Larch is amongst the most deprived 15% of neighbourhoods in England, but it doesn't quite seem like a 'cold spot' in these terms. It appears to have quite a lot of community activity going on – old and new, informal and formal - although it hasn't been formally measured or compared with other places. There are signs, however, that sustaining the range and level of community activities is an everyday struggle, particularly with some initiatives. The local heritage group is hoping to boost its fortunes through success in several funding applications to develop its work. Without this, it seems, the group of three main volunteers with struggle to keep the Heritage Centre open, active and of interest to the community. Meanwhile, there seems to be a good deal of optimism surrounding Larch's community shop and café, trading very well after a year and a half, and new hope for the establishment of a horticultural social enterprise.

It is hard to understand the nature and organisation of community activity without knowing something of the recent and not-so-recent past; in Larch's case the development of the village as a mining settlement in the late 19th century, the economic and social consequences of pit closure, and most recently the investment in community regeneration. Larch's community association, and the range of enterprising and community projects it organises, are a product of this legacy. However, such an outcome does not happen automatically, it is generated, sustained and reproduced through the ongoing everyday activities of residents and others supporting them. Voluntary and community activities, in this case unpaid, are thus an investment of time and energy in the village. Overall, however, it seems that most active community involvement does not go far beyond a good handful of residents. This is not to say that people do not have other kinds of community or charitable interests and involvements, for example in fundraising activities with national charities. However there is a concern that few younger people are getting involved in the village. The responsibility for much community activity rests with a small cohort of ageing residents, and this might be increasingly difficult to bear. Can community activity in the village be replenished?

This short introduction to the Real Times case study Larch has set the scene for subsequent developments in community activities. It could be seen as a form of 'qualitative baseline', a moment in time from which to view subsequent events. However, this notion seems to freeze time and hold things too still, rather than regard community activities as always in process, always unfolding. Sarah looks to the heavens for divine intervention, Graham organises a group of fellow volunteers in the shop, and Becky is working through an extensive 'to do' list of enterprise start up actions. Over the next few years, from mid-2010, the research follows the fortunes and challenges of the various community activities in Larch. It addresses intriguing questions about what happens next to the local heritage group, the community shop and the idea for a horticultural social enterprise. And it considers the broader relationship between community activities and wider support structures. In 2010, in the continuing midst of a financial crisis and economic uncertainty, a new Coalition-government was formed with an explicit deficit reduction strategy based on cuts in public spending. It was seeking to distinguish its approach from that of the previous Labour governments. In these circumstances, what happens to places like Larch when, arguably, the political will changes and the money runs out?

References

- Centre for Social Justice (2013) *Something's Got to Give: The state of Britain's voluntary and community sector* (London, Centre for Social Justice).
- Coalfields Task Force (1998) *Making the Difference: A New Start for England's Coalfield Communities* (London, Department for Environment, Transport and the Regions).
- Fligstein, N. (2001) 'Social Skill and the Theory of Fields' *Sociological Theory* 19(2): 105-125.
- Haughton, G. (ed) (1999) *Community Economic Development* (London, The Stationery Office/Regional Studies Association).
- Macmillan, R. (2011) *Seeing things differently? The promise of qualitative longitudinal research on the third sector* TSRC Working Paper 56 (Birmingham, Third Sector Research Centre).
- Mohan, J. and Bulloch, S.L. (2012) *The idea of a 'civic core': what are the overlaps between charitable giving, volunteering, and civic participation in England and Wales?* TSRC Working Paper 73 (Birmingham, Third Sector Research Centre).
- Waddington, D. (2004) 'Making the difference in Warsop Vale? Assessing the impact of government regeneration policy and community development in a Nottinghamshire ex-mining community' *Social Policy and Society*, 3(1), pp. 1-11.
- Waddington, D., Critcher, C., Dicks, B. and Parry, D. (2001) *Out of the Ashes? The Social Impact of Industrial Contraction and Regeneration on Britain's Mining Communities* (London, The Stationery Office/Regional Studies Association).