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

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## Abstract

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 working paper draws on a second round of interviews and focus group activity between February 2011 and January 2012 to essentially explore *'Big Society – a further 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?

### Keywords

# Contents

> For all the talk of 'community engagement' over the last decade or so, in practice, it has tended to mean little more than consultation with the community. And activists have told me that far too often this has felt like a tick box exercise with the overall aim of driving through an organisation's agenda rather than really understanding and responding to what the public wants. (Home Office: 2011 p. 27)

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 new Coalition Government. The 'Big Society' was about genuine community 'empowerment…freedom…and responsibility' (David Cameron: 19th July 2010). It involved social action for local change 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 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 (Chanan and Miller: 2010, Coote: 2010b, Stott: 2010. Ishkanian and Szreter; 2012), with the Archbishop of Canterbury condemning the concept of Big Society as *'aspirational waffle'* and an attempt to hide a 'deeply damaging withdrawal of the state from its responsibilities to the most vulnerable' (Daily Telegraph: 24/6/12).

Others have pointed out that the Big Society, in stressing the importance of associational life, is not a 'new' concept but bears resemblances to Adam Smith and Alexis de Tocqueville in the 18th and 19th centuries (Harris: 2012) but that it is, increasingly, 'an English political discourse with different policy developments now taking place within the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.' (Alcock: 2012 p. 1). There has, however, been a growing international interest in Big Society as a policy mechanism for 'dismantling the state' (Rodgers: 2011/Whelan, 2012).

'Big Society' is still with us. Indeed, whereas original statements around Big Society could be seen as 'stripping back to the skeleton' there has been a realisation that 'the skeleton needs some vital organs to make it work' (Rural Interview). Hence the Localism Act, the Open Public Services White Paper and its 2012 update (HM Government) and the development of the community organisers programme within Locality have offered the policy framework and implementation mechanisms for Big

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[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

Society . Whilst scepticism remains about the 'badging' of Big Society and some of the rhetoric may have changed – for example Alcock (2012) points out that recent government statements refer to 'charities, voluntary organisations and social enterprises' with no reference to communities and community groups – the agenda of Big Society may be here to stay in some guise as 'the devolution of power to communities and citizens will not occur overnight: if successful, as witnesses suggested, it will take a generation'. (HM Parliament: 2011)

For all the change in language around Government policy it is, however, possible to identify key continuities between the previous and current administrations regarding communities and community groups. Participatory budget setting remains, as does the emphasis on the role of social enterprise. *National Citizen Service* bears more than a passing resemblance to youth volunteering proposals in *Building Britain's Future* (HM Government: 2009). There are echoes of double devolution and '*communities in control*' (CLG: 2008) in the *Localism Act* and asset transfer (CLG: 2007) remains, though in an extended form (McCabe: 2011).

Further, in terms of expectations on communities, there are certain philosophical continuities, albeit from different political starting points. Community, under New Labour, was a vehicle for re-connecting people to political process: 'active citizens'. Under the current administration community organisers are envisaged as change agents challenging existing power structures and vested interests: 'Big Society [is] a means of addressing economic and political decline or crisis and is based on a philosophy' and beyond a political programme 'it rests on a bold conjecture, that lying beneath the surface of British society today is a vast amount of latent and untapped energy' (Norman: 2010 p. 195). The notion of community organisers as community disruptors, using social action to effect change may be seen as "different to the interventionist state where New Labour was using community as a governance vehicle" (Umbrella Organisation Interview). Whilst this 'community disruption' may 'initially create chaos' again there may be a longer term agenda of as 'out of the chaos will emerge a new Big Society paradigm equipped to deliver co-design and co-delivery in public services and a new relationship between citizen's and the State' (Blume: 2012 p.214)' Or perhaps more pragmatically the 'austere fiscal climate will require a transformation in the role that citizens play in shaping public services and the places in which they live' (McLean and Dellot: 2011 p.7).

There is a further continuity between the Coalition's agenda and Communitarian elements within New Labour administrations: beliefs that the state, in its current form, is no longer fit for purpose and relationship between an 'enabling state, active individual and linking institution' (Norman: 2010 p. 7) needs radically re-shaping.

To identify certain continuities over the last decade is not to play down key policy and political shifts. Firstly, there is the speed of change, the initial sense of urgency in the *Localism Act* and *Open Public Services White Papers* on the rights to challenge, manage, and buy, as a tool for the rapid transformation of public services; the speed at which budgetary cuts have been introduced and sustained; the reshaping of the institutional landscape with the closure of Regional Development Agencies and Government Offices for the Regions and the ending of a range of Government

sponsored regeneration and related initiatives such as the Future Jobs and Working Neighbourhoods Funds.

Secondly, there is a shift in the rhetoric around communities and the anticipation that Big Society will fundamentally alter relationships and responsibilities between the state, community and the individual:

> It's just saying I can do this or we can do this, or we can do it together rather than looking for others to do things. It requires a change of mindset and approach. It's not about traditional volunteering but changing relationships with state and more emphasis on the individual rather than formal organisation level. …At the most trivial level seeing....., I don't know. a discarded kitchen sink unit in a bush and thinking, ah, for goodness sake, I'll get rid of that, as opposed to phoning the council. (Policy Interview)

However, if: 'the struggle in the concept of Big Society is to translate a lofty aspiration into tangible strategies' (Policy Interview), where then do below the radar community groups sit within those 'lofty aspirations' and 'tangible strategies'?

## Aims and methods

The aim of this working paper is to explore three key aspects of policy shifts over the past eighteen months in relation to below the radar community groups:

- How are these groups and national community sector networks responding to change?
- What has been the impact of policy shifts and, in particular, what has been the effect of central and local government budget cuts?
- What are the challenges for both communities and Government itself in delivering the agendas of the Big Society, localism, community organising and open public services?

The findings draw on the growing body of practitioner and academic literature on 'Big Society' and on in depth interviews with 24 representatives from 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. However, this proved problematic as the sessions coincided with the first round of redundancies in some agencies and the closure of others (February-May 2011). Funder, and social enterprise (micro-community businesses) were added to the sample for 2011-12.

A summary of the interviews with 22 agencies – and their areas of interest/activity is provided in Table 1.

| Expertise/focus | 2010 | 2011-12 |
|---|---|---|
| Migrant and Refugee Community | 5 | 2 |
| Rural | 5 | 3 |
| Development Agency | 4 | 4 |
| Generic Umbrella/Membership Organisations | 4 | 4 |
| Black and Minority Ethnic Focus | 4 | 2 |
| Statutory/Governmental Policy | 3 | 3 |
| Faith | 2 | 1 |
| Arts | 1 | 1 |
| Gender | 1 | 0 |
| Funder | 0 | 1 |
| Social Enterprise | 0 | 1 |
| Total | 29 | 22 |

National level interviews were supplemented by a series of workshops/discussion groups, with 98 participants, at the Universities of Gloucestershire and Edge Hill as well as at NCVO and TSRC itself.

At the same time the Below the Radar workstream was piloting research into how those active in community groups access skills, knowledge and resources, and how these are shared both within and between groups. Whilst the focus of these interviews was not Big Society or policy changes and their impact per se, inevitably these topics were touched on by interviewees. Where relevant, the commentaries of these grass roots organisations have been included to 'ground' and reflect back on the views of national policy and practice networks. A summary of the groups involved is provided in Table 2.

**Table 2: Supplementary Interviews: Below the Radar Community Groups**

| Expertise/focus | Number | Focus |
|---|---|---|
| Communities of interest | 3 | Faith<br>Refugees<br>Domestic Violence |
| Rural | 3 | Community Asset Ownership<br>Campaigning |
| Inner Urban | 1 | Campaigning/Housing |
| Peripheral Estates | 3 | Community hubs<br>Multi-purpose faith based group |
| Market Town | 1 | Area improvements |
| Total | 11 organisations | 16 community groups |

Following sections of the working paper explore:

- atitudes to Big Society and policy change;
- the impact on below the radar groups;
- the response of those groups to change;
- the challenges for Government and communities in responding to the current direction of policy;
- possible future scenarios for community groups.

## Responses to policy change

There has been no one response to the Big Society agenda and policy change over the last year (Stott: 2010). Rather it is possible 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.

Then there are those whose optimism is tinged with anxiety. Will below the radar groups seize the opportunity to manage assets, challenge existing service configurations and expand? Community organisers, for example may galvanise local groups and engage them meaningfully in decision making processes – but:

> My analysis is that they saw New Labour's plans to narrow the gap, the whole neighbourhood agenda was thwarted by vested interest, bureaucratic obstacles, conservatism with a small C, and they are deliberately adopting a strategy of disruption to status quo within the local government, public sector, not for profit voluntary, community sector – wherever it resides. They are knowingly throwing in these disruptors to create transformation assuming that there will be a degree of chaos that erupts, like out of chaos a new kind of paradigm, a new… we get transformation. My worry is that in some areas they'll get stuck on chaos. (Development Agency Interview)

There have also been:

1. Pragmatic responses. Whatever the underlying view of the Big Society is, voluntary and community groups need to adapt to the new environment:

   > As citizens we can of course engage with the ideological arguments in many places – our political party, our faith community, our neighbourhood group, our trade union. But as leaders of our organisations I suggest we are primarily pragmatists. (Curley: 2011, p. 7)

2. Nuanced interpretations:

   > One response to the closure of your local library is the Save the Library campaign, and that's the sort of traditional community action approach. Another response is to say, "Well," you know, they're going to cut the libraries or they're going to halve the libraries or whatever, "Are there more creative ways of providing a library service?" In the context of a multi-purpose enterprise of some kind, which actually in the end is going to deliver a better solution than simply campaigning to save the library. (Development Agency Interview)

3.  Sceptical responses 'overriding scepticism and massive concern and frankly, opposition really'. Big Society is 'ideological window dressing' (Umbrella Organisation Interview)

4.  A lack of concern as the whole agenda is seen as an irrelevance: 'that kind of mood music and discourse and all the rest of it, and I think that quite possibly, at the local level, might mean little or nothing to many community groups. Below the radar groups are, and always have been, delivering on key aspects of the Big Society agenda. (Umbrella Organisation Interview).

The 'stances' adopted in terms of attitudes towards 'The Big Society' agenda and its delivery mechanisms (Open Public Services. Localism and Community Organising) cut across the different groups involved in the research. Both small community based organisations and larger national network organisations saw opportunities – and threats – in the current environment – though it was local community based groups that were, perhaps, most sceptical about a commitment to engage with them in delivering on current agendas around the devolution of power and decision making

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

## The impact of policy change

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:

> 'In a world with perfect real-time data on both government spending and the income of charities, the extent of cuts in funding of voluntary and community organisations would be immediately apparent. But a lack of refined data from government – many departments and local authorities do not hold comprehensive details on current or planned spending on the voluntary and community sector – and a time lag in producing data such as that shown in NCVO's Almanac which uses charity accounts, means that a number of proxies and estimates have to be developed instead.' (Kane and Allen: 2011)

Several approaches to assessing financial impact have been adopted at a national level: self-reporting (www.voluntarysectorcuts.org.uk) and the use of Freedom of Information Act inquiries (www.falseeconomy.org.uk). These suggest that over the first three quarters of 2011 there were cuts of between £76,680,881 (Voluntary Sector Cuts) and £110 million (False Economy). However, as noted, the data is incomplete and conflates cuts to mainstream Local Authority grants and contracts with the ending of specific funding streams such as the Working Neighbourhoods Fund. Analyses of HM Treasury information suggested that there will be a reduction in Local and Central Government Funding of £2.8billion between 2011 and 2016 (Kane and Allen: 2011) with cuts to Local Authority budgets of between 10% and 25% over the life of the current Parliament. Finally, drawing on the Labour Force Survey Indicates that employment in the voluntary sector fell by around 38,000 employees (8.7% of the workforce between the second quarters of 2010 and 2012 with an increase of

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[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.

approximately 20,000, representing 2.6% growth in the first quarter of 2012 (Skills Third Sector: 13/8/12)

At the more local level, a survey in April/May 2011 by London Voluntary Service Council (2011) suggests (from 120 respondents) that 51% had cut services in 2010-11 with 54% expecting more closures in 2012. The findings show an increased demand for volunteering opportunities but reduced organisational capacity to deliver quality volunteer opportunities. Similar patterns also emerge from survey's in the North East (Chapman et al.: 2010) and North West (Davidson and Packman: 2012) where 51% of 215 groups surveyed reported they were likely to close within the next three years with 78.8% having had their level of activity affected by public sector funding cuts, though with an increase in demand for their services.

Some research has also been undertaken into the effects of budget reductions on particular parts of the sector. For Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) community groups involved in education in London it is estimated that there have been 25% cuts in budgets that groups have not been able to absorb (Stokes: 2011). ROTA (2011) highlight the difficulties of both formal voluntary organisations and small community groups attracting funding for unpopular causes and/or services that are seen as beyond the mainstream (e.g. forced marriages/female circumcision). Again, research in Yorkshire and Humberside (Lachman and Malik: 2012) suggests that cuts have fallen disproportionately on BME organisations, particularly those with an advocacy or representation role.

Whilst cuts have impacted on communities of interest, arguing that these have been disproportionate may be more problematic. Rather, national research (Alcock: 2012) and enquiries, suggest that it is those groups in poor communities (with a reliance on Local Authority or, now historic, area based initiatives funds) that have been most affected 'across the board'. Indeed, 'The Big Society Audit' (Slocock: 2012 p.9) argues that:

> 'A question mark hangs over the ability of the Big Society to reach those communities and individuals that might benefit the most. The Audit identifies a 'Big Society Gap' in levels of trust, engagement and social action between the most disadvantaged and affluent, urban and rural communities and younger and older people. This will make it difficult for those communities to take up the initiatives being offered to them. Most worryingly, public services delivered by voluntary organisations in disadvantaged areas are more likely to be at risk from public sector cuts and to provide services to disadvantaged people. More care is needed to address current inequalities if the Big Society is to be successful'.

Substantially less is known about the impact on small community groups: for two reasons. Generally, Hemming (2011 pp4/5) notes that 'we know surprisingly little about the mass of associations in Britain today' and 'tend to brush over their role in our past as well'. More specifically, there is a lack of 'below the radar' financial data. Studies to date have focused on the registered and regulated voluntary and community sectors, examining the impact on Registered Charities and groups with other legal status. Even when 'drilling down' to small organisations defined as those with and annual income/turnover of £200,000 (BVSC: 2010) and whilst some Local Authorities have published figures for cuts to small grants schemes, these are global amounts and the number of groups effected cannot therefore be identified.

Closer to 'below the radar' groups, South West Foundation surveyed 173 small community and voluntary organisations with incomes of under £30,000 a year with largest category (44%) under £5,000. Some 49% of respondents reported having difficulty raising funds in the 2011 financial year with 78% expecting further difficulty in 2012. No overall figure for reductions in budget is identified and the authors conclude that 'small community groups are being affected in many ways by the current economic climate but much of this is invisible and unrecorded'. (Crawley and Watkin: 2011 p.4)

Cuts, whilst difficult to quantify, are clearly having an impact. Most visibly at a national level this has involved the reduction of community sector Strategic Partners funded through Government, with the closure of some network organisations, mergers, and a reduction in capacity to respond either to member needs all reported throughout interviews.

But is there also something else happening to below the radar groups in the current economic and policy environment? Cuts may only be one dimension in a complex and shifting picture.

## Surviving below the radar?

It is possible to argue that cuts in Central and Local Government funding have little or no impact on 'below the radar' groups who are not reliant on grants as a form of income: arts and sports groups or local community support groups that generate their own, or need very few, financial resources. However, participants in both this and the parallel research into skills and knowledge in 'below the radar' groups identified a number of other factors that had impacted on their activities: a multiplier effect was seen as coming into play that was about more than direct financial support (See Case Study: Crumley Pensioner's Group).

**Case Study 1: 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.

The elements of this 'multiplier effect' were highlighted as:

**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)

For those in low paid jobs, the issue was both time and resources:

> 'The main crux of it being is that the people that are involved in all of this are volunteers. I personally over the years, I'm easily about £3,500 down because I couldn't make a claim against things and I couldn't claim for this and I couldn't claim for that. I don't do it no more. I can't afford it….. It's all very well £1.80 to town and £1.80 back, but when you've got 2 or 3 meetings a week, straight away that's £10 wiped off, so over a month that's £40. It's an awful lot of money. Between times you've got letters to write and phone calls to make and you've got to buy the envelopes. All this kind of stuff, it all adds up.' (Tenants and Resident's Association Interview)

This was seen as having a potential 'knock on' effect in terms of the independent capacity to organise:

> 'Each member was paying a membership fee, they were charging twenty pounds for a membership for a year and then they ran very specific events, and each event people had to pay to participate in, so obviously now with people losing jobs and stuff and people having less money, I can see that that's a massive impact on them not being able to run their own activities.' (Membership Organisation Interview)

With proposed changes in the welfare system and Housing Benefit others faced the struggle to

> 'Just survive in their own families, in their own houses, and so I think it's going to be a lot harder because I think people's energy is going to go, for some it's going to go more into trying to survive.' (Membership Organisation Interview)

Participants in the research identified other issues of timing in addition to constraints based on personal time and resources. Firstly, the Localism Act and Open Public Services White Paper may present opportunities for some groups to grow in the future. However, the speed at which cuts had been implemented had made short to medium term survival difficult. Whilst there was a view that a more gradual, tapered, model of reduced funding would better enable groups to manage their futures, there was also the view that:

> 'I think some people are just utterly despairing. I think some people are waiting for things to snap back into something they recognise, that this can't go on forever and the story that they're telling you is eventually people will realise what treating us like this will mean for our area as we perceive it and they'll be sorry basically. And the funding will be restored and the terms of my lease will change. Things will go back to more or less the way they were. How long can we hang on for with our reserves or operating on reduced staff time or me taking a pay cut. And there's always that kind of bargaining going on between clinging on or just giving up.' (Faith Organisation Interview)

Or slightly more optimistically that as community groups could be 'passionate, risk taking and persistent', possess 'cultural competency' (Knight and Robson: 2007 p.4) and be innovative and flexible (Chapman et al.: 2009) there would be survival though in different guises:

> 'If [a] group then loses its funding, does it actually mean that group will cease to exist, or does it actually mean that there is a strength in that group that it can still exist but as a volunteer-led group and it just won't provide so many services; it will retreat to a core and will almost go back to its roots. And then, maybe, when funding comes along again they might actually get other projects and get some money in to become a paid staff organisation again.' (Development Agency Interview)

A second 'timing' issue was the speed with which policy anticipated groups could respond to change. For example, one group interviewed had secured substantial capital to extend their village hall and take on the management of this asset. However, even in a relatively affluent community, this process had taken nearly eight years, whereas:

> 'Because of all the financial pressures and so on, there isn't time for that sort of timed process to happen. What's happening at the moment on assets is that Local Authorities are disposing of them very rapidly and, even where there is a commitment, in principle, to consider Asset Transfer, there's a real danger that local groups will be unable to respond within the required timescales and assets will either close or move to the private sector.' (Policy Interview)

Concerns over time and timing were also raised over the Community Organisers Programme: that community organising was a long term process and that a one year 'kick start' was insufficient. Interviewees thought that Organisers would either 'go for 'visible' leaders who may or may not be representative of a wider community' (Development Agency Interview) or go for 'quick fixes' that did not address complex community issues and could have a negative impact on cohesion:

> 'You can see all of this potential for really complicated issues being a knife through butter that makes things actually a lot worse in terms of local cohesion and a sense of solidarity within communities. So the main concern is a community organiser as it's being put forward now gets a very short intensive training about stirring it up and getting people off their backsides. What do they do when it actually gets to the real complex issues? And that isn't fast stuff and products; that's patience and relationship building and conflict resolution and debate done within perspectives of equalities, respect for diversity, understanding difference - all of that sort of stuff you don't learn that. You don't even learn that on a course. You learn that through practice and support.' (Membership Organisation Interview)

Indeed, initial research by Richardson (2011) in Bradford suggests that community organisers have been engaged in informal/small scale activity rather than campaigning or service delivery.

**Spaces and places**

Added to issues of time were concerns over the places and spaces for community activity. The Office of the Third Sector, commenting on the National Survey of Third Sector Organisations noted that:

> 'Third Sector organisations without premises of their own – the great majority – rely on cheap or free meeting space at council-run or council-supported venues such as community centres, village halls and sports clubs. This is a fundamental contribution to the groups' ability to function.' (OTS: 2010)

Yet there was a strong view, across the different perspectives of interviewees that this 'fundamental contribution' was under threat, (See Case Study 1). For example: the importance of community anchor organisations has been recognised in terms of their role in acting as a hub for community activity (HM Treasury: 2007/CLG: 2008). They were, however facing both

- Practical challenges:

  There's less money in the system and eventually it will filter through so that people who otherwise might have taken the bus to come and see them or might have hired a room for a user's group meeting will not be doing that anymore. And I think it will be a longer term decline. There will be a withering rather than an abrupt cut. (Member Organisation Interview)

  Not only is their lease going up a lot but also they're finding that maintenance arrangements are becoming less much favourable as pressures is put on local authorities to make money out of those assets or get rid of them' (Membership Organisation Interview)

- Philosophical challenges

  The community development approach and the traditional role of community anchor organisations are in danger of being lost in the organisational change forced on them by the pressures of the current policy and funding environment (Hutchinson and Cairns: 2010 p.148).

There was a potential risk that, to survive, community anchors took on a service delivery role whilst losing the ability to act as community advocates. The potential loss of 'invited spaces' and 'claimed' or 'popular' spaces (Cornwall: 2004) may not be part of the immediate impact of direct financial cuts, but may, in the longer term, have a more substantial effect on the viability and vibrancy of community groups and activity.

**Capacity and understandings**

A third ingredient in this suggested 'multiplier effect' is capacity and understanding. Much has been made of the current policy environment enabling small community groups to 'scale up':

> 'For smaller voluntary and community sector groups, there has been an added driver of needing to come together to be big enough to be able to access external resources, whether in the form of service contracts or grant-funding.' (Evison and Jochum: 2010 p.7)

There was a view amongst the majority of participants that larger groups will 'scale up' and take on services 'not necessarily because they want to but as a strategy for survival.' (Membership Organisation Interview). There was also limited initial evidence that some smaller, particularly Black and Minority Ethnic groups were shifting to bid for service provision funding 'as a way of getting ready for contract and getting a track record.' (BME Organisation Interview)

> 'I think people are far more desperate, in terms of what they're applying for… I think what we've noticed in this last round [of applications], that small groups are trying to expand their services in order to attract funding, well over… well beyond their skills and ability to do that. And that's a sign of desperation, because, you know, if they're doing something well, like training and childcare provision or something, you then get groups saying, "Oh, we're going to do a job club. We're going to offer mentoring support. We're going to do

work placements." All on a part-time basis… do you know what I mean? It's like there's a mismatch of expectation, because they're desperate to try and fit into the funding authorities you have.' (Funder Interview)

Overall, however, there was no appetite reported for small organisations to 'scale up'. The Village Shop did not want to manage community shops in other villages or the local library. The Tenants and Residents Association was in the process of moving to estate management, but were uninterested in offering management services for other estates. The Village Hall Committee recognised that there were other assets at risk in the community, but felt their focus had to be on making the hall itself sustainable rather than expanding. Part of this is undoubtedly about the level of understanding about the motivators for below the radar activity: groups focusing on the immediate issue in their community (McCabe: 2011) and:

'People probably have not got terribly clear ideas about, you know, the difference between small community groups who actually want to remain small community groups and those enterprising local agencies that might start small but actually want to grow'. (Policy Interview)

Even if the small groups interviewed had wanted to 'scale up' a number of barriers were identified. The trend towards fewer and larger contracts (for example the *Employment Programme)* effectively excluded even larger formal voluntary organisations with strong community roots (See Case Study 2: The Advice Shop).

**Case Study 2: The Advice Shop**

The Advice Shop was established in 1972, initially on a voluntary basis, later securing contracts with the Local Authority and Legal Services Commission (LSC). The Shop has grown from 2 to 22 staff and serves a diverse inner city area working in nine community languages with over 40,000 users. However, reductions in Local Authority budgets and revisions to LSC contract conditions have resulted in both these funders tendering out advice contracts to a single city wide provider, with offices three miles from the area served by the shop. As a result, the Shop has had to reduce staff numbers and limit opening times. It is likely to close in March 2013.

Even if Pre-Qualifying Questionnaire were taken out of the equation, risk averse commissioning was also seen as a factor limiting the likelihood of small groups procuring public service contracts. The shift from grants to loans and venture capital meant that, to take on a local asset, individuals in the community could be putting their own homes at risk as security for finance; a level of personal financial risk not, traditionally, associated with community action.

There was more interest in small scale replication: the Community Shop shared its experiences with other groups, as did the Tenants and Residents Association and the Village Hall. Others could then learn and apply those lessons in their own communities and their own contexts. Pressures on 'small scale replication', even where this had economic value to communities and the potential to create employment was, however, questioned. In the current climate:

'Local enterprise partnerships and regional development agencies before them, what they want is the big winners. … They want to be able to say we've created 100,000 jobs and the easiest way to do that is get some big, big corporates in because it's easier and actually, nurturing smaller organisations, creating one or two jobs and not creating lots of other ones and supporting lots of them, that's actually much harder to do and there is a pressure on, those enterprise partnerships are going to be measured on GDA and jobs and so it is going to be… The expectation on them is going to create pressures on them to be able to do what they need to do because it's going to be much easier if they get Nissan in to build a factory than it is to support lots of small businesses employing one or two more people'. (Social Enterprise Interview)

## Discussion

These 'early findings' indicate that below the radar community groups and activities face pressure from a number of fronts, direct funding cuts and reductions in the personal time and resources activists can give, and a threat to the spaces and places that support and enable those activities. Whilst this was originally identified as a 'multiplier effect', participants in focus groups felt that, particularly in already marginalised communities, this could be more accurately described as 'compound disadvantage' with negative events happening 'at the same time' rather than sequentially. Hence Case Study 1, Crumley Pensioners Group, might have survived the cut to its community transport grant – but not the compound effect of this happening at the same time as the loss of access to free premises, pro-bono advice and volunteer support.

Indeed, Jordan (2010) raises two key issues and neatly sums up the shared concerns of research participants:

> [There are] Two central weaknesses of Big Society: Firstly it takes time for cultures of self organisation in communities and groups to develop, and commercial interests will occupy the spaces left as the Third Way systems are closed down. Secondly, because wider solidarities are so weak, new organisations will be homogeneous and narrow in their membership, reflecting the fragmentation of society into neighbourhoods of similar income, age groups and lifestyles.' (Jordan: 2010 pp. 202-3)

Delivering 'Big Society' depends on an assumption of, or aspirations for, increased levels of voluntary action. Some are optimistic; Hall (1999) and Hemming (2011) (using data from the General Household and British Social Attitudes Surveys) argue there has been no decline in associational organisation, and that 'small groups achieve big things'.

Other data sets give less grounds for optimism. Mohan (2011) estimates that 31% of adults currently account for 87% of formal volunteering, and 72% of public participation. As noted there are practical limits in terms of individual and time work commitments (58% reported time constraints as a barrier CLG: 2010), Wilson and Leach (2011) draw on Mohan when exploring the 'civic pulse' and arguing for strategies for doubling levels of voluntary action. Yet, the data suggests that 7.6% of the population constitute the 'primary core' of activists involved in multiple groups and activities (Mohan; 2011). Further, despite investment in various initiatives over the last decade, volunteering rates have remained virtually unchanged (CLG: 2010; McCabe: 2011).

This concept of a civic core presents a real challenge to the direction and intent of current policy. If communities are to do more, who will the new activists be? If groups are to take on more responsibilities, manage assets, run local services (with the associated stresses of managing these) with payment based on results, is there the risk of an emerging reluctant civic core?

A second key issue surrounds Big Society and equalities. Dorling et al. paint a picture of:

> 'British society…moving towards demographic segregation and economic polarisation, social fragmentation and political disengagement since at least the late 1960s.' (Dorling et al.: 2008).

Research participants were concerned that Big Society agendas and localism could exacerbate this. New groups may form, but reflect 'the fragmentation of society' (Jordan: 2010 and the opportunities afforded to some by both the Localism Bill and Open Public Services would effectively 'empower the already powerful' (Development Agency Interview). Indeed a representative interviewed from BME organisations reported that BME communities were increasingly disengaging from the current policy rhetoric and processes. Others were concerned about the potential to exacerbate divisions within and between communities:

> 'I think it is pressure on resources leading to almost dog eat dog, different organisations are being forced to become much more selfish, which of course is not good news for community based activity which should be about trust, should be about openness, should be about looking at things over a longer period of time rather than quick fixes. Going back… there will be winners and losers.' (Development Agency Interview)

Successes in some areas may be offset by failure in others:

> 'I think again it depends on how you measure success as well, because I think in some areas it will looks really successful because you have maybe the right sort of ingredients in place, you know community groups or community organisations that has the skill or the capacity to take on contracts like that, but then I think you'll have other areas where that's not happening, my real worry is that it's not kind of measuring the impact for those people who aren't really part of anything.' (Membership Organisation Interview)

In terms of communities and community groups, could the current cuts, in conjunction with the multiplier effects discussed earlier, contribute to a 'Big but broken and more divided society'? One where we are 'anxiety ridden, prone to depression, worried about how others see us, unsure of our friendships, driven to consume and with little or no community life' (Wilkinson and Pickett: 2010).

This is not the intention of policy. Indeed some commentators (Norman: 2010) argue the Big Society is about transformation across social structures and communities. In this transformational landscape, what does the future hold for below the radar community groups and activities? Again, there was throughout the research, consensus in some debates.

Firstly, the agenda was ambitious, highly aspirational and high risk for Government. Again, there was some cautious optimism:

> 'Governments… this government, the next government, whatever complexion that is, national government, local governments, have to understand that the community venture, whether we call it organising or development, is a longer term undertaking, and if it really

just boils down to headlines, sound bites, then it will fail. If however people have the guts and the stomach for a longer term undertaking then it could be a very much more positive ending.' (Development Agency Interview)

And cautionary tales:

'Well, in 18 months time I suppose we'll be two and half-ish years on from the last election and halfway through the parliamentary cycle and if these little platoons of people aren't making the world a better place and providing a better health service or education system then was there in the beginning of 2010 then they'll be in a lot of trouble. I mean they've actually taken a huge gamble, a massive gamble I think in their approach to the voluntary sector. Given all the threats that I've just described and actually the thing is it's largely not in their gift as well to make it happen or not. And I'd love to think that they've done some sort of fiendishly complicated calculation that I can't manage myself and I know it's all right but actually I don't think they have at all. I think they believe that and this is how society would operate were they to remove all the things which stop us behaving in a virtuous manner. And the virtuous citizens step up.' (Membership Organisation Interview)

Secondly, Localism, the cuts and Open Public Services would change the relationship between community groups and Local Authorities.

'Listen to people, engage them, help them to find connections, give them simple steps and simple tools to get things going themselves. After time they'll start seeing things differently and will challenge the council and a more mature relationship will develop between them and the Local Authority.' (Policy Interview)

It would, however, be an uneven picture. Some interviewees felt that cuts in some Local Authority areas had fallen disproportionally on small groups who were not delivering public services 'as they are the easiest to cut' whilst:

'Others are, you know, and all credit to them, I think some local authorities are genuinely being quite bold and visionary in trying to sort of really re-define the kind of local ecology of who does what, and see a much stronger role for community organisations, community and voluntary organisations.' (Membership Organisation Interview)

Thirdly, there was a view that community groups which developed under the post 1997 New Labour administration and which are largely or wholly reliant on Government funding will struggle whilst:

'Those organisations that sit more closely with their communities of interest and place, especially if they have been established for a long time, will have the momentum and tenacity to keep going.' (Chapman and Robinson: 2011 p.35)

But again a warning:

'In adversity, people do come together and actually find the bonds between them, which can happen. I have experienced that. Yes, that could be a positive thing. And it's almost now, you know, potentially this is the time to do that. It's just that danger, if people just think about only their own interest.' (Funder Interview)

## Conclusions

As noted, much recent research has focused on the impact of the Coalition's deficit reduction strategy on the formal voluntary sector. This, perhaps inevitably, has been dominated by the cuts. However, the current paper argues that, for below the radar community groups the immediate picture is more complex and potentially invidious. It is not only about the loss of grants/funding – but also the loss of affordable places and spaces to meet, of access to pro-bono advice, increasing difficulties in recruiting members or volunteers and the pressures of time – and the short timescales associated with potential opportunities (e.g. asset transfer). These compound disadvantages may also be over-laid by the virtual exclusion of smaller voluntary organisations, let alone community groups, from bidding for contracts. As Taylor (2011 p.260) notes;

> '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'

Others worry that:

> If it becomes a land grab or a money hunt or some sort of beauty contest about who does something better or so on, then it actually poisons some of the goodwill and social solidarity or social capital and trust that kinds of needs to make things grow really (Funder Interview)

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 (Deakin: 1995). Equally, for every self-evident 'true statement' about the sector (community groups are inclusive) there is often an equal and opposite truth (community groups are exclusive and excluding).

It is also problematic predicting future from a relatively small, qualitative, sample of 'below the radar' groups and community sector network organisation. What is presented is a snapshot in time rather than longitudinal data. So community groups may be 'thriving, surviving, dying' (Davidson and Packman: 2012) but was this not always so? On the other hand, a majority of those interviewed both nationally and at the local level felt that the last two years marked a fundamental shift in the nature of the relationship between communities, grass roots groups, Government and the formal voluntary sector:

> 'I don't want to predict what the future, say in five years, will look like for voluntary never mind community groups. There may be a leaner but more efficient and effective sector, a more entrepreneurial and business like sector – or just a leaner one. What we will see played out in some form is a profound change in the relationships between people, government and the sector.' (Development Agency Interview).

Just as there has been no single community or voluntary sector response to the Big Society agenda to date, there appears to be no unifying vision for the future, For some of those interviewed, it was a matter of time, of hanging in there and waiting for 'normal service' (in terms of funding and

relationships with local and central government) to be resumed. For others, Localism and Open Public Services offer the opportunity (at an as yet unspecified time in the future) to grow and expand. On the one hand this can be seen as political rhetoric; Nick Hurd MP (cited in Kent: 2011 no page number) has stated that:

> 'Through the opening up of public services to increasing the power of local communities, the injection of capital through the Big Society Bank, and through the growing amount of time and money given as a result of our Green Paper, the Government is clear that opportunities for the sector will increase.'

On the other hand, research participants (perhaps more in hope than expectation) also saw potential opportunities in the new organisational landscape of reformed public services:

> 'Everything might become an opportunity because local authorities are helpless and the resulting power vacuum allows for community groups to take initiatives and risks that local authorities cannot take' (Focus Group: Community Activist).

Commentators from both the left and right of the political spectrum agree, however, that austerity is here for the foreseeable future and that 'Big Society' (however badged) is here to stay as its:

> 'Focus on active participation and social responsibility also holds a normative appeal. It speaks to people from across the ideological spectrum who believe that British politics and public policy has for too long lacked an animating vision of the 'good society' based on shared obligations of citizenship and self-government.' (McLean and Dellott: 2011 p.7)

So, rather than predict the future for below the radar community groups, it may be of more use to raise three key questions, based on the current findings to focus future research.

Firstly: policy, it has been argued (Jackson and Clark: 2012), has been:

> 'Developed without sufficient consideration of equalities issues and equalities impact…..often without sufficient regard to the legislative elements of the Equalities Act 2010. Indeed the whole notion of equalities appears to have taken a step backwards in emerging central policy and as a core value. The language has indeed moved from equality towards fairness suggesting a weakened commitment to equality and those groups with protected characteristics.'

If Big Society 'ignores the reality of persistent and institutional disadvantages' (Silver: 2012 p.38) facing some communities, will there be a growing divide between the have's and the have not's' both within the third sector and wider society?

Secondly, there is an assumption underlying the current direction of policy that there is an ever expanding, or 'elastic', pool of active citizens and that 'active citizenship could be strengthened by tapping into the pool of 'willing localists' ( Richardson: 2012a p.1). Will this be the case? Or as Mohan argues (2011) is there a distinctly finite 'civic core' of activists. After all, levels of formal volunteering did not increase in the last decade despite a five-fold increase in funding for volunteer infrastructure and support (Richardson: 2012b) and

> 'People usually choose to participate in community activities when they find them optional, small scale, convivial and life-enhancing, but many of the Government's plans

for supporting Big Society are conditional, formalised, complicated and hard graft'. (Coote: 2010 b p.18)

And finally, by way of summarising these key questions: will communities and community groups engage in and try to influence the direction of policy either through direct social action or formal democratic processes or will they turn inwards, focus on survival and disengage from political discourses that bear little resemblance to people's lived experiences?

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## Below the Radar

This research theme explores the role, function, impact and experiences of small community groups or activists. These include those working at a local level or in communities of interest - such as women's groups or refugee and migrant groups. We are interested in both formal organisations and more informal community activity. The research is informed by a reference group which brings together practitioners from national community networks, policy makers and researchers, as well as others who bring particular perspectives on, for example, rural, gender or black and minority ethnic issues.

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