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McCabe, Allister; Phillimore, Jennifer

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Chapter 5

All Change? Surviving 'below the radar': community groups and activities in hard times

Angus McCabe and Jenny Phillimore

Chapter aims

The aim of this chapter, which draws on 85 interviews and six focus groups conducted in 2010, 2012 and 2015, is to explore three key shifts in the policy environment over the past six years in relation to below the radar community groups:

- How did these groups respond to change?
- What was the impact of policy shifts and, in particular, what was the effect of central and local government budget cuts 'below the radar,?
- What are the challenges for both communities and Government itself in delivering the agendas of localism, 'social action' and open public services?

Background; austerity in policy context

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. The term community has been adopted in an uncritical fashion and assumed to relate to a coherent set of individuals who share common goals or geographies. Community activists have reported that far too often "engagement" has felt like a tick box exercise, a gesture towards dialogue rather than a genuine attempt to listen and change. Engagement instead was said to feel tokenistic masking the real aim of government which was perceived as the imposition of their own agenda.

From 2010 onwards, it has been possible to identify two very different debates on community and community groups. Firstly there was the transformational language adopted in the early stages of the Coalition Government. The 'Big Society' was meant to be about genuine community 'empowerment…freedom…and responsibility' (David Cameron: 19th July 2010). Big Society was intended to involve 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.

The concept of a 'Big Society' was however 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*' 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 2010, Stott 2010, Ishkanian and Szreter 2012), with the Archbishop of Canterbury condemning the concept of 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 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 pointed out that the Big Society, in stressing the importance of associational life, was not a 'new' concept but bore resemblances to the social theories of Adam Smith and Alexis de Tocqueville dating from the 18th and 19th centuries (Harris: 2012).

'Big Society' as a policy headline has subsequently disappeared and in hindsight been described as 'an English political discourse with different policy developments…..taking place within the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.' (Alcock: 2012 p. 1) It did inform subsequent Coalition Government agendas: hence the Localism Act, the Open Public Services White Paper and its 2012 update (HM Government). Further, in terms of expectations on communities, there were, in the early years of the Coalition, certain philosophical continuities, albeit from different political starting points. Community, under New Labour, was a vehicle for re-connecting people to political process as so-called 'active citizens'. Under the Coalition administration community organisers were envisaged as change agents challenging existing power structures and vested interests: 'a means of addressing economic and political decline or crisis and is based on a philosophy' and beyond any 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).

Some of that rhetoric of fundamental change, generated at a community level, remained throughout the Coalition Governments term of office. Commentators spoke of a new relationship emerging between the state and citizens. At one level this was, in some senses, aspirational shaped by a belief that the state, in its current form, was no longer fit for purpose and relationship between an 'enabling state, active individual and linking institution' (Norman: 2010 p. 7) needed radically re-shaping. In the face of continuing austerity, for some involving community more in service delivery was seen as a purely pragmatic response in that in an '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).

Indeed, the idea of a greater level of community involvement took hold in some quarters more traditionally associated with left of centre politics. With continued austerity the 'normal service' of a big state doing for citizens in no longer tenable (Parker 2015). Co-production became the new orthodoxy Bouvaird et al 2015) as; 'a new paradigm [with community groups] equipped to deliver co-design and co-delivery in public services and a new relationship between citizens and the State' (Blume: 2012 p.214).

Responses to austerity 2010-2016

There were multiple responses from interview respondents to the Coalition's early agenda for activating communities and community groups (Stott: 2010). . Some welcomed the initial direction of travel. Localism, for example, was seen as offering the opportunity of a real transfer of power to communities. The Open Public Services White Paper might they contended, in the medium to longer

term, enable even small community groups to expand as Big Society recognised the value and importance of grass roots activity (Coote; 2010).

Such optimism has, in some cases, over the final years of the Coalition Government and on into the Conservative administration, given way to a resigned pragmatism at one level, and cynicism at another. Just as the Big Society was seen as a smokescreen for cuts, so co-production 'is just a mechanism for passing any responsibility, and any blame when things go wrong, on from the state to the individual, the community' (Faith leader interview).

Indeed, there has been a move away from engaging in any political discourse at the level of co-production and social action to a dominant focus on the continuing cuts to Government funding and their impact on the voluntary sector.

Globally, NCVO (Clark *et al* 2012 and Kane *et al* 2014) consistently estimated the cuts to the voluntary and community sector in 2010 to 2012 to have been £1.3 billion withat least a further £1.2 billion expected by 2015. These are, however, only estimates as there is '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)

Problems estimating the level of cuts also exist in the online mechanisms for reporting the impact of cutbacks: for example self-reporting (www.voluntarysectorcuts.org.uk) and the use of Freedom of Information Act inquiries (www.falseeconomy.org.uk). Both provided a partial picture of the changes underway and have now fallen by the wayside. More local surveys of community based organisations provided a consistent picture across regions in England but were often small scale and relied upon organisations' statements about cuts to services they experienced (rather than form financial data) and/or their views about the anticipated outcomes of any future cuts (Chapman *et al* 2010, London Voluntary Service Council 2011, Davidson and Packham 2012). For example Foundation South West argued 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). Still others suggested that the cuts have had a disproportionate effect on specific parts of the sector – for example Black and Minority Ethnic Organisations and those with an advocacy role (Stokes, 2011, ROTA 2011, Lachman and Malik:2012). However, larger scale national research (Alcock: 2012), suggested that groups in poor communities (with a reliance on Local Authority or, now historic, area based initiatives funds) were most affected 'across the board' with austerity cuts exacerbating pre-existing inequalities (Slocock: 2012)

Substantially less is known about the impact of austerity on small community groups (Hemming 2011). Studies focused on the registered and regulated voluntary and community sectors, examining the impact on Registered Charities and groups with other legal statuses **Surviving below the radar?**

Given that 'below the radar' groups are not heavily dependent on grants as a form of income: i.e. arts and sports groups or local community support groups generate their own income, or need very few, financial resources cuts in Central and Local Government funding may have little or no impact on their activities 'However, participants interviewed about the cuts and and in other interviews exploring skills and knowledge in 'below the radar' groups identified a number of other recession

and austerity related factors that had impacted on their activities. These are discussed in the next part of this chapter.

 Time and resources

Those running or volunteering in community activities are frequently employed elsewhere, earning the income that enables them to volunteer. With increased concern about job security in their day job community activists felt the pressure of increased work-loads which limited the spare time they had available 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**)**

Further the rapidity at which of policy changed gave groups little opportunity to respond to changes that might otherwise have been of interest. For example, one group interviewed secured, prior to austerity cuts, substantial capital to extend their village hall and taken on its management. However, even in a relatively affluent community, the 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)

Other interviewees noted that unrealistic timescales had been placed on those involved in the locally managed Community Organisers programme with the expectation that substantial change could be affected by such organisers in the communities selected within 51 weeks. Indeed, initial research by Richardson (2011) in Bradford suggested that community organisers were engaged in informal/small scale activity rather than working towards substantive, structural change either at a local or policy level – the scale of their actions did not respond to Government expectations.

For community activists in low paid jobs, the issue was a lack of 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).

The expectation that activists would cover their own costs, regardless of their financial situation, was seen as having a potential 'knock on' effect in terms of their 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)

For a number of interviewees, particularly those active in inner city community groups, lack of time, energy and personalresources were exacerbated by welfare reform:

'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)

Places and spaces for community activity

Many community organisations were dependent on access to some kind of space in order to run their activities or to meet.**.** Indeed 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)

However respondents outlined how, since 2010, Local Authorities experiencing high levels of cuts in central Government income and forced to make cuts to local services closed community centres or started to charge for room hire in libraries and other public buildings at commercial rates that were too expensive for small groups. Talking about a community group that managed the local tenant's hall, one activist noted:

'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).

Beyond the local authority context the closure of voluntary sector community anchor organisations following their loss of Government grants also meant loss of 'invited spaces' and 'claimed' or 'popular' spaces (Cornwall: 2004, Hutchinson and Cairns 2010).

Between 2010 and 2016 below the radar groups appeared to experience a multiplier effect, or compound disadvantages (where adverse factors impact at one and the same time) coming into play that went beyond the effects of direct financial support or funding. Combined these could have a devastating impact on their ability to operate as was the case forCrumley Pensioner's Group (see Case Study 1).

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.

Scaling up to survive?

An inherent expectation in the Big Society and subsequent agendas was that they should grow in order to engage with the opportunities they were being offered to get more involved in service provision.

'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)

'Scaling up' – getting bigger – was seen by some in the sector as a key survival strategy (Moore and Mullins; 2013). Growing, it has been argued, was likely to be a more successful approach to sustainability than relying on reserves and hoping for BIG Lottery money – or hanging on to the apparently vain hope that 'things can only get better'.

There are two fundamental problems with this model of survival. Firstly, the data collected in interviews found there was very little appetite for small organisations to 'scale up'. For example the Village Shop did not want to manage community shops in other villages or the local library, despite such an approach being suggested by the Local Authority. The Tenants and Residents Association was in the process of moving into estate management of their own housing estate, but they 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. The groups we interviewed focused on the immediate issue in their community and did not want to move out of their local sphere of action (McCabe: 2011, McCabe et al 2016)

Secondly, even if small groups (particularly community based organisations with some funding) were to be motivated to 'scale up' they faced a number of barriers. The trend in public service contracting out had been towards tendering fewer and larger contracts (for example the Employment Programme) which because of their terms and conditions effectively excluded even larger formal voluntary organisations. The financial requirements set out in Pre-qualifying Questionnaires (PQQs)for organisations bidding for such contracts, required that the total contract value was less

than 25% of annual turnover. If the third sector was to get involved at all such contracts favoured, under the Coalition, the large, national, charities which did have high levels of turnover. Post 2015, conditions in PQQs on monitoring, financial reporting and standards systems (as well as ideology) have benefited the corporate sector, with for example large multi-nationals winning all the prime contracts for the delivery of elements of the probation service. Where third sector organisations are involved in large state contracts they are partners to the corporates who take the leading role and determine the terms, conditions and remuneration that reaches non-corporates. The experiences recalled by the Advice Shop illustrates how the processes of the contract culture effectively excludes local voluntary organisations – never mind community groups (see Case Study 2).

Case Study 2: The Advice Shop

The Advice Shop was established in 1972, initially on a voluntary basis, then with a series of small grants and later securing contracts with the Local Authority and Legal Services Commission (LSC). The Shop grew 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 contract conditions resulted in a reduction of income and staffing. The Local Authority decided to tender out advice services to a single city wide provider in 2012. By this point the Shop's annual turnover had fallen below the threshold required in the bidding process. As a result, the Shop further reduced staff numbers and limited opening times. Accumulated reserves and a Big Lottery grant enabled the Advice Shop to survive, on a restricted basis for a further four years until closure in 2016

Concluding remarks: All change below the radar?

As noted, research has focused on the impact of the Coalition and subsequent Conservative administration's deficit reduction strategy on the formal voluntary sector with budget cuts and their impacts on the sector forming a key focus.

However, for below the radar community groups the findings offer insight that is complex and potentially invidious. BTR groups not only experience 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. These compound disadvantages may also be over-laid by the virtual exclusion of smaller voluntary organisations, let alone community groups, from bidding for contracts which may have enabled them to be sustainable and to ensure that communities do have a genuine role in shaping and providing services for themselves. 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.'

Those ripple effects were certainly felt by those small community based voluntaries which we interviewed who, as noted, have either closed, or survived (at least for a while) on reserves or through Big Lottery funds. Beyond access to finance, however, what was being played out in the period of intense change in which our interviews took place was a profound shift in the relationship between communities, community groups and the larger charities and the state.

Some remained optimistic arguing that despite the changes voluntary action had been driven out by the state or withered on the vine of austerity. Rates of participation remained constant over time (Hall 1999, Hemming 2011, Mohan 2011). Austerity arguably provided an opportunity to rethink the landscape of communities and develop a new mutualism

'Focus on active participation and social responsibility.. 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)

Co-production is the way forward to changing services and relationships:

'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)

Or more pragmatically:

'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).

Others caution that community groups and activities have come to mirror, rather than address or challenge wider social changes with Danny Dorling arguing that

'British society…moving towards demographic segregation and economic polarisation, social fragmentation and political disengagement since at least the late 1960s.' (Dorling et al.: 2008 p35).

Indeed, the majority of below the radar research participants felt that policy over at least the last decade had exacerbated this. New groups may form, but: 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)

The opportunities afforded to some by both the Localism Act and Open Public Services would effectively 'empower the already powerful' (Development Agency Interview), increase social division And leave communities '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).

Others (NCIA 2015) worry that:

'It has become 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)

So, in summary, community groups continue in austere times 'thriving, surviving, dying' (Davidson and Packham: 2012) but was this not always so?

'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)

They continue in part because they are misunderstood by policy makers

'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….are conditional, formalised, complicated and hard graft'. (Coote: 2010 p.18)

They survive because Government initiatives and funding have passed them by and they rely on their own money, efforts and skills? But at what costs to those community groups – and to the activists involved –financially, emotionally and in terms of solidarity:

'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)

Reflective exercises

Reflecting on the two case studies in this chapter, what strategies might the Crumley Pensioners Group and the Advice shop have adopted to survive and what might the benefits and costs of those strategies be?

Community activity has been seen as the social glue that binds people together. Consider this argument in the light of concerns that communities and community groups are becoming more fragmented, self-interested and reflect pre-existing social and economic divisions?

This chapter offers two different arguments about the future of community action. Some see co-design and co-production with communities as the way forward in developing more responsive and effective services – others see these ideas as a way of passing responsibility and blame from Government to communities. To what extent do you agree with these views? Can they to some extent co-exist?

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