

Civil society strategy: have your say – Submitted 22/05/18

Our Civil Society

What are the strengths of civil society today? You might consider its mission and motivation, services for the public, difference to quality of life or economic and/or social impact.

There are many strengths of civil society. A significant proportion of the population give their time voluntarily and donate cash to good causes. More generally, the sector is full of organisations whose mission is to help others. However, the sector is not homogeneous. Organisations differ in terms of size and activity. Some deliver services, some are grant funded, many have a mixed funding model. Then there are smaller organisations. According to NCVO, four fifths of civil society organisations have an income below £100,000, although these only account for 5% of the sector's income.

And many organisations have income much lower even than this threshold, or operate informally or outside of conventional funding or classification – something explored by the Third Sector Research Centre in their 'Below the Radar' workstream. This tier of local organisation and initiative can form a vital part of a local community's social fabric and be critical to the quality of life of local people – something that is very apparent in many of the areas benefiting from Big Local funding.

Yet one common factor that cuts across this diverse sector is the fact that it is still in a period of transition. With austerity putting pressure on funding from both the national and local state, as well as changing economic and demographic factors, including an aging population, civil society organisations are still adapting and changing business models to respond. While funding from local and central government has decreased from the peak of 2007/08 to 2010/11, it is still higher than the early 2000s. But as NCVO note, the headline figures mask important trends, such as a greater proportion of funding going to larger organisations and to organisations delivering health and social care.

Whilst government funding only accounts for a small part of the resources available to smaller and grassroots organisations, a decline in funding to the sorts of facilities needed for them to thrive and succeed, in particular affordable or free community space, is threatening their sustainability. Something explored by Dan Gregory in his recent essay 'Skittled Out' for Local Trust and, separately, in a Local Trust submission about a Community Local Wealth Fund that looks at how to support social infrastructure and the social fabric more broadly.

Whilst civil society has (largely) proved its resilience, and remains a vital part of the social fabric of the UK, it will need to continue to adapt to be as relevant going forwards. In Big Local there are 150 partnerships of people across the country who give their time on a voluntary basis, totalling 1000s of hours a week. The projects so far have been diverse. A big focus of early work by many Big Local areas has been around civic engagement – perhaps reflecting the extent to which Big Local areas have a history of lack of engagement and participation before the programme. As of July 2017, 134 out of 150 Big Local areas were currently spending money on explicit community engagement projects. There is also the development of green spaces, addressing transport issues, helping people access employment and multiple issues around local services. An example is the Wargrave Big Local

in Newton-Le-Willows who have invested significantly in bringing a range of new services and agencies into a community that has suffered from the loss of their major local employer and has traditionally lacked embedded local activity and capacity.

How can government help to increase the impact of civil society?

The model at Big Local is place-based funding, which is outlined in more detail elsewhere in the response in relation to funding models. In basic terms, place-based funding in Big Local is about supporting places, not projects and organisations. It involves a transfer of money and genuine decision making power into the hands of communities, and importantly it is a long term investment too, at least ten years, in contrast to short-term regeneration programmes in the past, which also gave residents only a limited say in how the funding should be spent.

Using the consultation's definition of civil society, it essential to focus on the needs of communities and look at how they might be addressed in the local context. Improving the social infrastructure is a vital part of this. For example, having suitable spaces for interaction. Which organisations are best suited (private or voluntary sector) to address local problems will depend on the needs of that community.

There should be an expectation that all communities will have access to affordable community space. This is incredibly important in many Big Local areas. The evidence emerging from Big Local is of the value of accessible space as a place where communities can come together and for viable local organisations to act as anchors for a much wider range of small/micro-level community endeavour. Not only is it a place for established activities to take place, but there can be a cross-fertilization of ideas and expertise with fledgling groups and activities as well.

One way to finance this is to dedicate dormant assets to a Community Wealth Fund, in order to recapitalise community level infrastructure. Another is to think about how asset transfer rules can be changed to allow for communities to have time to try to develop viable uses for community assets, rather than having to take on risk and face the challenge of raising funds for a space first.

Finally, it is worth stating that our experience from many Big Local areas is that – even with long term funding – increased levels of transience, particularly in poorer and more deprived areas, is a major obstacle to getting people involved in community-level civic activity. Consideration might be given to reviewing rules on private sector and social sector tenancy length to support people becoming more rooted in communities, as a first step to their greater participation in civic life.

How can public trust in civil society be built and maintained?

There have been various events to cause the erosion of trust in the private sector and politics in recent decades, in addition to a number of scandals relating to the conduct of major charities affecting the reputation of the voluntary sector.

Whilst we do not believe that recent scandals are representative of civil society as a whole, it is undoubtedly true that levels of trust are harder to maintain when there is a huge distance between providers and users, whatever the sector – whether in public services or in civil society.

Experience of delivering the Big Local programme, which provides significant funding to groups of local residents to use to commission and fund activities on their community's behalf, suggests that the devolution of decision making and resources to a very local level can – over time – both increase trust in decision making and also strengthen ties between communities and statutory and other partners, enabling more effective partnership across all sectors for the benefit of local people.

How can civil society be supported to have a stronger role in shaping government policy now and/or in the future?

The experience of developing Big Local is that social fabric and social infrastructure (see more about this in the Early Action Task Force's paper 'Valuing Social Infrastructure') is uneven across different areas, even those that may share similarities, such as high levels of deprivation. This variation might be in places to congregate, traditions of voluntary action and mutual aid. We do not just need a vibrant civil society in urban centres or rural places, but also in areas where there is less civic infrastructure. In some areas the building blocks to healthy civic societies are less present than other areas; areas on the periphery, for example the borders of local authority areas and/or remote estates, will have different needs to areas in urban centres or rural communities with long standing voluntary traditions.

Big Local shows the value of devolving resources and decision making to local levels so that decisions are made by and with local people, not on their behalf by the state. And this can both encourage greater partnership and innovation, which can benefit both partners. For example Kingsbrook and Cauldwell Big Local have funded a Community Health Champion who acts as the 'missing link' between patients and life-changing services and opportunities locally, signposting and sometimes accompanying people to attend carers' support groups, debt and benefits advice, walking groups, and more. The pilot was picked up and replicated across Bedford by the local authority.

We interpret civil society as inclusive of all those outside of the public sector, who share the mission of building a stronger society and improving lives, regardless of traditional sector boundaries such as charity or private and for profit or not. What are the advantages of using this interpretation in developing this Strategy?

Local Trust is excited by this definition. It matches our own experience delivering Big Local, where traditional categories do not reflect the reality on the ground. In a thriving place, every sector is part of creating social goods. Providing employment is a pro-social act, for example. And a community needs places to meet and feel comfortable. A community centre can do this. But a local pub can be critical to this too.

However, it needs to be noted that in many areas suffering from low levels of civic capital also have low levels of engagement and activity from the private sector. We are seeing in many poorer areas

not just a reduction in traditional state supported community infrastructure but also a retreat of much of the private sector as pubs and shops close.

By adopting the widest definition of civil society it may be possible to take a more holistic view of some of the challenges and consider how affected communities can develop their own solutions. Good examples include The Bevy, a community-owned pub in Brighton; and in many Big Local areas we are seeing the establishment of community cafes and other semi-commercial and social enterprise activities to fill gaps left by the private sector, as well as attempts to support the re-establishment of new private sector activity in previously abandoned shop units on estates.

What are the disadvantages of using this interpretation in developing this Strategy?

On a semantic level, 'civil society' would usually be defined more narrowly as non-profit activities. We welcome and embrace the new definition, but calling this phenomenon 'civil society' may lead to confusion or misinterpretation.

Our own experience of Big Local required a rethink of what is in civil society and what is not. Ultimately the terminology did not matter; our own thinking had to capture the reality on the ground, where decline in the voluntary and private sector were synonymous; moreover, positive change for communities are emerging both from the voluntary and private sectors.

People

Enabling more people to play an active role in society

Reflecting on your own experience or examples you are aware of in the UK or abroad, how have people successfully taken action to improve things for themselves and their communities? Please tell us why it has worked well.

Big Local is a simple idea that thinks big – 150 areas are given a million pounds to spend how they wish over ten years. A million pounds is a lot of money, compared to small grants, yet it is small change when compared to a local authority's social care budget. But the point is that it is a tangible asset. It has been used to buy buildings and build play parks. It has also been used to build small flower beds or put in a bin. Whichever way, it is the community's choice and that's the real story. An independent evaluation has found that those involved in the programme have had an improvement in their feeling of well-being, which follows other programmes where people are put into control.

In some Big Local areas, the £1 million has helped change the way in which local communities and those working with them relate to shared challenges. Whilst it is a relatively small sum of money, it has nevertheless changed local dynamics, enabling communities to work on solving issues together on an equal footing, as opposed to focusing on problems – helping change local citizens from the position of passive applicants or recipients of assistance to active negotiators of change.

Are there any additional changes that would enable more people to take action on issues that matter to them?

Support is vital, even if it is at only a very low level. There are various support mechanisms in Big Local. Having a Rep, who are workers employed by Local Trust at a community level to provide light touch mentoring and support to local areas, for a few days every month, and broader support from Local Trust has been vital in helping Big Local areas facilitate community engagement. There is also other support projects, such as grants for innovative projects in Big Local areas. Many areas employ a local support worker to help them. The roles range from administrative support to community development work.

Considering all the changes you discussed in this section, how could these be implemented now and/or in the future? You may want to think about the role of different parties, for example central and local government, charities, businesses, yourself / your organisation and others.

Big Local is an effective model for bringing different sectors together. For example, facilitating new housing in Lawrence Weston, near Bristol. Lawrence Weston Big Local has worked closely with its Locally Trusted Organisation (Ambition Lawrence Weston) on various projects. This includes developing the large area of derelict land in the middle of the estate. There are plans for a new supermarket, new housing (40 new homes including shared ownership and intermediate market rent) and local services, including a GP surgery, in a community hub. They have worked with a number of local authorities, including in Bristol, South Gloucestershire and North Somerset, which has attracted Coastal Communities Fund monies and brought other investment in the area including a supermarket. They have also helped develop wind turbine and a solar farm which result in greener energy and a financial return on investment. In total around £4 million in additional resources has been brought in.

Partnership

The funding and the financing environment

Reflecting on your own experience, or examples you are aware of in the UK or abroad, what does an effective pool of funding and financing as well as income opportunities for the voluntary and community sector look like?

Big Local is an effective funding model. The £1 million provides both an asset and leverage for communities. It can get them a 'place at the table' in local authority discussions and can also enable them to be taken seriously by private investors. The asset provides opportunities for investment and match funding; the support structure around Big Local reduces the risk and enhances the possibilities and contacts.

Where is there the potential for changes to the funding and financing environment to better support the work of the voluntary and community sector, for example increasing the use of new models of funding, use of technology and/or changes to current funding practice?

Where it works best place-based funding such as Big Local provides local people with a long term, resourced and relevant voice capable not just of representing views but also directly delivering change that they themselves control, providing a focus and a legitimacy to the engagement that underpins it. Research on how Big Local areas are attracting additional resources shows that no respondents felt that the area would have received all the additional resources had there not been a Big Local partnership bringing the community together to lead change in their area. Three quarters of people felt that they would have attracted little or no resources without Big Local.

Are there any additional changes that would improve the funding and financing environment for the voluntary and community sector?

The experience of the Big Local programme is that high levels of community engagement, civic action and wider partnership can be achieved by transferring significant resources and decision making directly to communities over the long term. Provided this is accompanied by sufficient support and capacity building this can be transformative, and achieve far more, both in terms of direct outputs and – perhaps even more importantly – the spin off benefits of stronger, more confident and capable local resident-led civic economies than conventional top down, short term and project-focused funding of the sort that has typified national and local state led interventions and (until recently) most philanthropic funders.

Considering all the changes you discussed in this section, how could these changes be implemented now and/or in the future? You may want to think about the role of different parties, for example central and local government, independent funders, charities, businesses, yourself / your organisation and others.

We believe there is considerable learning to be gained from the experience of the Big Local programme, and will continue to invest significantly in evaluation and learning from the programme in order to inform the development of future approaches to funding communities and building their capacity to sustain and grow local civil society into the long term.

Places

Devolution/localism

Big Local is a place-based fund – it invests in communities as opposed to projects or organisations. This provides a basis for community engagement across a range of activities and over a significant period of time – residents have multiple opportunities to get involved and can engage on issues in their areas that are important to them.

While the funding in many contemporary place-based programmes may be significantly less than the regeneration programmes of the late 1990s and 2000s, their contribution in part lay in fostering engagement. Crisp et al. summarise this: ‘Community led approaches are often as much about the process of mobilising individuals and communities as pursuing a clear defined set of outcomes.’

While this mobilisation is the essence of Big Local, the programme is also achieving focused outcomes as defined by the residents in relatively small areas. Focusing resources on hyperlocal areas, smaller than those in programmes such as New Deal for Communities, can maximise impact. Big Local and other place based programmes cannot solve all the issues resulting from the withdrawal of government funding, but can equip communities to react, upskill and focus on tangible change on a micro-level. This can result in an increased sense of belonging and in a shared sense of purpose across all the agencies that are involved.

Are there any additional changes that would enable more people working together to break down barriers in our communities and build a common sense of shared identity, belonging and purpose?

Whatever the context, a genuine shift in power is needed. For place-based funding to work, residents need to be able to influence decisions affecting them.

Considering all the changes you discussed in this section, how could these changes be addressed now and/or in the future? You may want to think about the role of different parties, for example central and local government, charities, businesses, yourself / your organisation and others.

Our experience of the programme so far is that in areas with little previous history of community involvement or activity, or where there is not a clear pre-existing sense of collective and shared identity, it can take several years of patient support and engagement to establish the trust, skills, confidence and vision needed for local people to start to take on the responsibility for making decisions about their own neighbourhoods. The Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) outlines the importance of the timeframe in avoiding short-termism: 'Most programmes emphasise the way in which capacity and community confidence in taking control builds over time. It also takes time to build trust – across communities and between communities and their partners. Conversely, short-term programmes, despite significant achievements, have been hampered by the need to demonstrate success over a limited period.'