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Big Society and the VCS

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Context

This paper is first in a series considering the role that voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations play in delivering Big Society and its principles. This paper analyses the over-arching role that binds all VCS organisations. Future papers in this series examine the additionality brought to the Big Society by VCS organisations working across an array of themes and specialist activities. This series aims to inform and support government thinking around the future of social activity and social policy and how that thinking must be embedded across all areas of policy development in order to gain maximum value from the Big Society approach. We have endeavoured to capture a 'picture' of the VCS offer to society as a whole and explain the way in which the sector flows and interacts, in consideration of the opportunities and challenges for moving forward in partnership with Government.

East Midlands Dimension

The 2010 UK Civil Society Almanac, produced by ncvo, identified 11,617 registered voluntary sector organisations in the East Midlands in 2007/8. These organisations have a collective turnover of over £1.2bn and manage assets in excess of £2.3bn. However, the number of registered organisations are minimal compared to the many unregistered and immeasurable local community and voluntary groups currently estimated to number somewhere between 19,000 and 25,000.

The East Midlands VCS works across a wide range of thematic areas including community development, volunteering, advice and guidance, sector support and capacity building, criminal justice, health and social care, education and training, environment and all aspects of equalities and human rights issues. VCS groups meet at regional level across each of these themes, drawing on local networks where they exist, to share expertise, deliver joint projects and services, raise coordinated voice and to align with other specialist networks on issues of common interest.

The regional network One East Midlands facilitates much of this inter-organisational dialogue, informs and engages the VCS in shaping policy at local through to national level and supports the VCS to adapt to the changing political environment. One East Midlands works closely with and through local support and development organisations and has an estimated reach of 30,362.

Leading the strategic development of the VCS in the East Midlands are two principle support networks, both of which are supported by One East Midlands:

East Midlands Infrastructure Steering Group

Brings together local support providers to share experiences, campaign effectively on issues pertinent to the whole region, shape relationships with elected members and public sector bodies and promote the benefits and strengths of VCS support services. Its membership includes CVS, rural community councils, local learning and skills networks and specialist equality bodies e.g. disability support.

Regional Infrastructure Consortium

Draws together the specialist 'wider third sector' service providers who operate at a level between local and national for reach, sustainability and efficiency purposes. Their work coordinates specialist input on policy issues and membership includes those working in the fields of equalities, asset development, rural communities, European funding, learning and skills, and social enterprise.

Challenges and opportunities

Size and complexity

The sheer diversity of interests, structures, geographical spread and reach across the VCS makes engagement complex. Indeed, the size of the VCS itself has led to competition and conflict within the sector as groups compete for resources to meet the needs of their particular beneficiaries. However, competition is an opportunity to improve quality, reach and overall standards of support on offer – particularly for delivery of services which are of interest to public sector organisations.

Diversity also brings a wide range of expertise and skills which can be harnessed and used to improve public service delivery.

Managing the issues of diversity, complexity and competition requires technical understanding of the VCS and an ability to both provide leadership and support independence simultaneously. Above all else this is the role of VCS infrastructure; to nurture. VCS infrastructure is not consistently high in quality and still needs development itself but where it works well it must be prized and valued for its skill, knowledge and unique positioning.

Equality of engagement

Maslow's Hierarchy of Need, published as part of the 'Theory of Human Motivation' in 1943 has endured to this day as a clear representation of how inability to achieve the basic requirements of life then become a physical, emotional and psychological barrier to self-actualisation – to become 'all that we can be'.

Big Society is predicated on the principle that people will be sufficiently able and motivated to engage actively and fully in their communities and in society as a whole. However, all evidence shows that any distance of an individual from meeting their personal needs directly impacts on their ability to engage and participate. Isolation, poverty, physical and emotional barriers, lack of social capital and low esteem all prevent self actualisation and are barriers to achieving the Big Society. Principles of Equal Opportunity dictate that those least able to participate should be supported to engage on a level playing field. We examine this issue through individual experiences in later papers in this series.

Economic impact

The VCS is a powerful driver of the local and national economy as an employer, deliverer of services and developer of skills, education and experience. The VCS supports people through difficult times, enabling them to reintegrate into society, return to good health and play an economic role. This preventative role is difficult to measure but has direct economic value to the local and national economy.

Value and reach

The VCS is innovative and flexible and therefore is often quicker to respond to local need than statutory service providers who can be restricted by bureaucracy. This flexibility makes the VCS a useful service delivery mechanism for the public sector but must not be at the expense of the sectors primary role as advocate. It is vital that contracts for the delivery of public services by the VCS do not inhibit or restrict our ability to communicate the changing needs of our beneficiaries.

In many cases, however, the VCS understanding of communities makes the sector a prime provider. The VCS is not free but offers exceptional value for money. For a modest investment the VCS delivers support and services to those furthest from mainstream provision and preventative approaches that reduce the need for future intervention.

Volunteering

Big Society relies heavily on personal commitment and dedication to a common cause. In reality, volunteers give their time and resources for many different reasons, which may or may not be completely in tune with the general aim. Volunteers must be kept engaged with any project, but that engagement is not infinite and may be terminated unilaterally for many different, unpredictable reasons. In short, volunteers self-select; they cannot be made or retained to order. This makes the application of volunteers in the delivery of services to the vulnerable difficult.

Volunteering is not free. Volunteers have exactly the same support needs as any paid employee. They require support, induction, training, supervision and opportunities to grow and develop in their role. The costs of volunteer management can be directly compared with the cost of any other employment simply without the salary, pension and National Insurance costs associated.

Volunteering is not equally spread across society; some sectors of society clearly find it easier to volunteer than others. The Compact has calculated the average cost of successfully recruiting and supporting a volunteer from the harder to reach sectors of society at £2,000 per person but saves much more than this through social inclusion, engagement and reduced need for public service intervention. Loss of funding for volunteering and volunteer support will have a direct negative impact on the UK economy.

At Risk

Reducing national debt is clearly in the interests of everyone in the UK. However, the reduction in public spending budgets is already having a disproportionate effect on local VCS funding and contracts. We welcome the statements made by David Cameron and senior ministers, asking local public sector to think before cutting VCS support. In reality the picture is concerning and unless swift and decisive action is taken there will be little of what we recognise and value in the VCS remaining to support delivery of a Big Society future.

Impact of National Policy

Throughout this series we will look at the existing national policy which frames the space in which many VCS organisations work. In each policy area we have considered two questions:

1. Does this policy entirely or in-part support Big Society principles?
2. How would the policy need to change in order to support and enable Big Society approaches better?

Our analysis of Big Society in relation to the VCS has been undertaken in a relatively short time frame, reflecting the current pace of policy change. We take this opportunity to strongly urge Government to embed the approach that we have used across departments to ensure that Big Society becomes the reality and success that it promises.

Rachel Quinn, Chief Executive, One East Midlands