

# ENABLING SOCIAL ACTION PROGRAMME

## FINDINGS FROM SCOPING GROUP DISCUSSIONS

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## Findings from Scoping Group Discussions, 16 March 2018, 20 April 2018 and 24 April 2018

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### ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

The universities of Sheffield and Hull are working in partnership with the Office for Civil Society on Phase 2 of the Enabling Social Action programme. This phase builds on the success of Phase 1 (the commissioning toolkit) and is focused upon expanding and facilitating shared learning around Enabling Social Action, and making social action a more routine and embedded part of commissioning.

The programme aims to understand how to grow social action practice between local authorities and VCSEs in England. The key objectives are:

- Sharing the theory of social action, by demonstrating the benefits in local situations.
- Catalysing a stakeholder led narrative about social action to inspire and inform others.

To do this we are using a Participatory Action Research approach and drawing on a range of stakeholder experiences to better understand the process, possibilities and challenges around social action.

### SCOPING DISCUSSION GROUPS

The first discussion took place within an existing meeting of local authority representatives on 16 March 2018. A further two discussion group meetings took place at NCVO offices, London with 18 participants from VCSEs on 20 April 2018 and 17 participants with commissioning backgrounds on 24 April 2018. All discussions were audio recorded with the permission of participants and no names are used in the report to protect anonymity and confidentiality. The purpose of discussions was to explore understandings of social action, and opportunities and challenges of social action including issues of measurement and co-production. This report shares the key findings from the scoping discussions.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Initial findings from the three scoping discussions showed:

### **Shared language**

- There were differences in the language, definitions and perceived values placed on social action.

### **Taking risks**

- “Letting go” of control was key in allowing social action to flourish. Local authorities were often preoccupied with managing risks and this stifles social action.

### **A new approach**

- Commissioning social action is a different way of doing commissioning which focuses on working *with* communities to move from the “transactional to the relational”. Greater investment in local social action initiatives should be prioritised over commissioning large organisations to deliver services.

### **Coproduction**

- Building relationships and co-production between commissioners, VSCEs, communities, businesses and elected members is critical for supporting better commissioning of social action. Competition over funding contracts creates conflict and can affect partnership building.

### **Expectations**

- There are tensions over what the levels of social action are. There are concerns that social action will replace core public services and blur boundaries of state and citizen responsibilities.

### **Measurement**

- There are major challenges in what and how to measure the impact of social action. Whilst useful evaluation tools exist these can be expensive or time consuming.

### **Learning**

- Reflecting and sharing learning from ‘unsuccessful’ social action is critical to growing it successfully. Difficult conversations about social action can be an opportunity.

## MAIN FINDINGS

### Understandings of social action

Social action was discussed as much broader than traditional formal volunteering as it also includes: informal volunteering, time banking schemes, time crediting, befriending and community organising. Participants gave a diverse range of definitions for social action including:

- Community engagement and citizens helping themselves and others
- Civic responsibility, civic pride and being a “good citizen”
- Community led by issues communities feel passionate about and where residents having a say in the development of services and encouraging people to have a say in how services are delivered
- Community driven within a climate of shrinking services and the need to manage demand and Local Authorities letting go of control over services.
- New ways of developing, re-designing and co-designing services for public participation
- A collaborative way to respond to and tackle social issues
- A reframing of relationships to address real community needs
- Representative democracy and civic participation
- Social integration, social cohesion and promoting life skills
- Doing things *with* others for personal enjoyment and to improve wellbeing (not doing *to*)
- Early intervention and prevention, taking a long term view for managing demand of services
- Improving life chances

### Challenges of a shared language of social action

The plethora of definitions participants gave for social action indicates a need to articulate these understandings and the benefits of social action as best as possible. The breadth of definitions for social action is arguably what is a key strength of social action. Nonetheless, the inexistence of a commonly shared language around social action was seen as problematic. Examples given included difficulties expressing concepts such as ‘co-production’ and ‘empowerment’ and concerns they become simply buzzwords or trends which fall out of favour. The danger is that labels can become potential barriers for having meaningful conversations about social action if meanings are unclear.

*“We all spoke different languages and that was the toughest thing.” (Participant from Local Authority meeting)*

### The value of social action

Linked with a lack of a universal definition of social action is problems in attributing its value. Amongst groups there was a sense (and concern) that the public sector places little value or appreciation of social action nor understand its impact. One commissioner described how social action “creates panic” for some local authorities who do not understand it. Yet social action was stressed as “added value” that can improve public policy outcomes and is complementary. Social action was described by one participant as an

“extraordinary product” which “should be celebrated” as a way of doing things differently. However, another participant argued that social action is an “abstract sell”.

However, the problem is that social action becomes “undersold” and devalued. Narrowly ‘boxing’ social action means it risks bureaucratisation. Some felt that the perceived value of social action was too narrowly focused as a short term means of saving money by local authorities. Others felt it was a last attempt to address a perceived “broken system” where all else had failed and “the last thing in the bag to look at.” (VCSE participant) It was expressed that some commissioners do not understand the value of social action and how to procure this ‘product’ and as a consequence “no-one knows how to get past this”. Yet there was empathy for commissioners who may be moved further away from social action approaches due to the pressures they face and their increased remits.

*“There’s a danger of us taking ownership of this thing called social action or volunteering. And we’re kind of ghettoising it- this special thing...and it’s actually something that we all do. And I think we risk sort of underselling this amazing thing.” (Participant from VCSE)*

### **Risk, control and bureaucracy**

The social action movement is arguably stifled by risk aversion and a culture of litigation which creates worry. It was suggested that what is required is a reshaping of conversations around social action to be less risk averse. Participants argued that commissioners need to learn to “let go” of control and embrace the true meaning of social action which involves taking some risk, being far less structured and prescriptive. However, many local authorities are reluctant to take risks. Often local authorities try to maintain control rather than utilising a framework developed by the community and this is detrimental to grassroots work. As one commissioner explained, local authorities may be focused on “hiding the wire” by placing too much emphasis on demonstrating that it is being made safe and minimising risk but is in reality a disguise for more bureaucracy. “Hiding the wire” encapsulated problems with transparency but also how barriers are put in the way of good social action happening. Participants also raised that policy makers need to understand safeguarding risks for vulnerable groups and in some cases there does need to be support and clinical supervision for volunteers. However there was criticism that councils want safeguarding in place but the reality is that you “can’t safeguard everyone”.

*“In procurement particularly they don’t understand the tools they have at their disposal because of this risk averse nature. And it’s very difficult in our positions to be able to say to them “well, actually you have x,y and z within legislation that you can use” without it coming across as ‘you can’t do your job’....I find it fascinating that everyone’s saying they want these things to happen but there’s a big brick wall come up.” (Participant from VCSE)*

To let social action happen organically control needs to be relinquished and managing risks associated with social action need to be minimised. It was suggested that this “letting go” of control points to the problem of paternalistic ownership over social action. Participants argued that social action is unable to be controlled and that once it starts to be controlled then it changes and is no longer social action. Social action was described as organic and needing a “spark” which cannot be “engineered”. Moreover social action can sometimes lead to social activism and there appeared a fine line between the two. This demonstrates the blurring of social activism and social action where volunteers are discouraged from campaigning or protesting “too loudly”. Attempts to control social action (even in best intentioned ways) can create tensions and even be counter-productive. An example was given of a “disastrous” scheme to formally reward volunteering through a credit system which caused outrage from some volunteers who perceived this as controlling.

*“What we’re leading to is social activism because we’re not able to engage in the right way...People have a right to be angry and protest but...we should be working more to engage and see what can be done.” (Participant from Commissioner group)*

### **Cultures of change and changing roles**

Changing the culture of local authorities meant re-building alliances internally and transforming practices to embrace social action through rejecting top down strategies in procurement and commissioning contracts. Where local authorities come from culturally may vary considerably in terms of the speed at which culture change is likely to happen. A participant in the local authority meeting group argued that to galvanise wider participation council should target where best to place their emphasis for providing support and empower people more. There is an openness to “doing thing differently to how we’ve done them before” and therefore “meeting need in a different way than before” (participant from local authority meeting). However, despite this willingness amongst groups there was a recognition that it is a cultural challenge, as one participant from the local authority meeting stated, to “move this beast”.

*“It requires quite a massive change in mindset and understanding what your role is as a commissioner instead of ‘I’m in control of money’. It’s a different way of working. I think there is less capacity in commissioning increasingly as a result of austerity.” (VCSE Participant)*

Some participants argued there is a lack of will from local government to invest in community mapping of “what is already out there” in terms of existing assets to build on and develop. Silo working was raised as a major problem and there is a need to challenge ideas that “re-inventing from scratch” is always appropriate. A participant from the local authority meeting group argued that unnecessary replication causes problems and gave an example of a councilor who wanted an online platform for volunteering which already existed. In addition, local authorities were seen as often slow with social media or unpopular to engage with through virtual networking (e.g. local authority’s Facebook presence).

It appears that the greatest challenge for social action to grow is unpacking long held notions and established ways of traditional commissioning and working in local authorities. It was argued that some commissioners are strongly resistant to change. There was discussion amongst the groups on changing

mindsets and engaging with individuals who are reluctant to embrace social action. However, it was suggested in the commissioner discussion group that the focus should be less on seeking to convert those who refuse to change and instead “find the people who are interested” and then “push the door open for them”. Through a coalition of likeminded individuals and proponents of social action new ways of commissioning can be embraced. These commissioners brought with them new ways of thinking as well as unique skill sets and experiences as boundary spanners.

*“I think the lines are blurring between sectors which reflects we need a different conversation and the state needs to be quite adult and open to that so it responds to some of those challenges and noises from within communities.” (Participant from Commissioner group)*

Yet it is not just at commissioning levels that culture change needs to occur. There was brief discussion on the variable role and changing responsibilities of elected members of parliament. Moreover, some large private and public organisations also need to change where there is too much emphasis on consultation (“death by consultation”) which may become repetitive and meaningless. Instead it was argued that these forms of consultation too need to be directed *by* the community.

### **Co-production, partnerships and relationships**

Social action represents a fundamental shift in ways of working for local authority commissioners, local authorities and communities towards that of working *with* communities and not doing *to*. This poses internal and external challenges with how to bring people on board, shift ingrained commissioning cultures and change expectations. A critical voice from the local authority meeting suggested that councils need to manage expectations from communities better and emphasise that an individual’s “civic responsibility doesn’t end when you pay council tax”. There is clearly a shift away from dependency culture and local authorities learning to let go, facilitate brokers and withdraw where needed. Social action is clearly much broader than about a particular project but is a way of *doing* and working differently together. Key to these transformations are moving from the “transactional to relational”. There is a move away from ‘decide, announce, defend’ forms of commissioning to creating the relationships and conversations *with* communities which facilitate different decision-making processes.

*“We have made residents very passive. We have done to people for a very long time and actually as we now try and pull away and we say, because of austerity and those sorts of things, stand on your own two feet” (Participant from Commissioner Group)*

The extent to which these new ways of working are understood and embraced by local authorities varies with some struggling to let go of control and look for ways to help create the condition for social action to grow. A need for traditional commissioning to move away from a procurement based approaches to that of relationship building and working collaboratively with the community is key. Yet many local authorities struggle with creating the conditions for social action and that it is necessary to bring on board other key stakeholders to facilitate creating the *conditions* for social action. What is needed is a recognition of where local authorities may add value and when to get out and “stop interfering”. Some local authorities act as if they “know best” but need to be far less “patronising”. Local authorities can get people talking and facilitate

at community level but then withdraw to allow communities the space to “get on with it”. It was argued that social action needs to start with what is good in a community and what people’s interests are and then local authorities’ roles are to create the conditions for social action to flourish by acting as an “enabler” to change rather than a “fixer”.

*“So it isn’t that I go and commission the VCS with a procured contract, I do, but there’s a lot of other stuff around that...to understand the need to enable, allow and create the conditions to let things happen (Participant from Commissioner Group)”*

Fundamentally there are power issues in these relationships which need to be addressed. Participants explained that approaching social action from different points of view could cause breakdowns in communication and failed partnerships. A participant from the local authority meeting felt that councils could be seen as a ‘god’ holding all the power which negatively impacted upon bringing people together. Others too likened the imbalance of power relations as familial and hierarchical:

*“I think there needs to be a coming together of both providers and commissioners around the table and we commission a co-designed commissioning process rather than it being a parent/child situation.” (Participant from VCSE)”*

Solutions and building capacity for change does not lie with local authority commissioners alone. There is a need to engage elected officials, communities, businesses and VCSEs to deliver the support that Commissioners need. Different stakeholders faced particular challenges:

- ❖ Some worried VCSEs are perceived as a “poor relation” and there were concerns that some CVSS are in danger of being “cut out altogether” to help advocate and support where increasingly local authorities engage directly with local communities. It was felt this bypasses an infrastructure which is already in existence and where brokering is already available.
- ❖ The involvement of private and business sectors with social action was also raised as important.
- ❖ Elected officials are also key to developing social action and the changed role of councilors with devolved budgets and responsibilities could be a challenge. Participants from the local authority meeting felt that elected officials were under-utilized in growing social action.

Improved infrastructure means better support and conditions for growing social action. Relationships are key to improving this aspect because social action is the greatest asset in a community and where there has been disinvestment in community development there is a need to go back and reinvest. Advantages for all stakeholders were expressed:

*“There is a real will for people to engage and how to translate this for benefits for both.” (Participant from Local Authority meeting)”*



## Levels of Social Action

Participants argued for a range of reasons behind motivations for social action including that communities have previously been seen as passive but there are greater pressures on communities now. What is also driving social action is an ageing population and pressures for social action to address this. Moreover, austerity was viewed as a pertinent driver which sees volunteering as a way to replace previously public funded services. Some viewed social action as “mopping up of services that are no longer there” or plugging gaps in provision (used to “creep into the gaps”).

*“Social action [is] taking up the slack created by austerity. And there’s a problematic narrative of volunteers replacing paid workers.” (Participant from Commissioner group)*

Key to these debates are the role of the statutory contract between state and citizen and issues of entitlement. Fundamental questions were raised in discussions including: what are the levels of what should be done voluntarily and what is right or fair to ask volunteers to do? What are the limits (if any) of volunteering? There was agreement that we need a better understanding on these levels of what should (and should not) be done voluntarily. There was considerable debate that social action should *not* be used to replace core public service provision but that it was difficult to be clear of where these boundaries lie as they are getting increasingly blurred. It was argued that trust is a key factor and that there is often mistrust in social action by existing public sector workers that volunteers are brought in to replace them. Consequently, the fear of job substitution can lead to a fear of engaging volunteers.

*“[Paid workers] feel threatened by volunteering because they think it’s being brought in to take over their role as a cheap replacement which is absolute rubbish. It’s so complimentary, they’re doing something different which fits alongside. So maybe there’s a lot that could be done around educating professionals to appreciate the value of it.” (Participant from VCSE)*

In terms of levels, there was also some argument that clarity over priorities is needed; is it simply *more* social action that is needed or *different* kinds of social action? Some felt that commissioners need to fund *new* things rather than invest in initiatives which are already working.

## Funding and time constraints

There was a great deal of discussion around funding infrastructure, funding cycles and transfer of power. There was consensus amongst participants that social action *must* be funded but we need to understand better where there are problems with communities spending the funds. For example, there were cases where communities were fearful about how to use the funding or lacked skills in unlocking funds in the best ways for their uses which risked funding stagnating within communities. Moreover, funding restrictions mean services become very limited or “parochial”. The competition for funding contracts could create conflict and prove detrimental to relationship building.

*“The sector is scrabbling around fighting, trying to find the bits of money and actually what is not being supported or recognised is that services to connect to are falling by the wayside and not being able to grow because all the energy is going into that connecting bit, and it feels that’s*

*because the commissioners are not getting alongside the people delivering the service or receiving activities to hear what's needed.” (Participant from VCSE)*

Most expressed the need to commission more effectively as there are fewer resources and capacity in commissioning. Yet despite these challenges, local social action can be more effective as money is permeating into communities rather than the state delivering solutions and funds for regeneration given to large organisations to deliver projects that are not directly connected to local communities. This focus on commissioning larger national organisations rather than smaller local ones was seen as problematic. It is through commissioning of local organisations and especially when grassroots initiatives emerge from communities then value is circulated in the community. Commissioning large national charities may result in revenue flows out of a region, thereby reducing opportunities for local economic development. Therefore, local social action needs more resources to grow and more long term funding.

*“The government sees it [social action] as a way of saving money.... There's a view from the top that volunteering is a free resource.” (Participant from VCSE)*

Lessons learned from other social action initiatives show that community empowerment takes time. Moreover, participants expressed a need to create space for reflection but often there is not the time to assess how well a project has worked (or where projects have failed and why) due to an inflexible focus on delivering targets rather than valuing reflexivity. This points to unresolved tensions in understanding what is working well/not well whilst dealing with other time pressures.

### **Measurement and Impact**

Several good examples of existing measures were discussed including the Social Value Engine Rose Regeneration Lincoln (which was proposed as simple, quick and effective and inexpensive). However, whilst several participants in the commissioning group backed a 'do it yourself' self-empowerment model of measurement, licenses and training could be expensive. Spice credits and time banking were also discussed as costly investments but which may over time be taken in-house to save money and reward social action. Representatives from the local authority meeting also wanted to know how to improve outcomes effectively and efficiently and “save us money”.

Asset based community development (ABCD) was also mentioned as a preferred way of understanding impact of social action and some localities where this is applied were discussed. What emerged from discussions was the importance for enabling people to tell their own story of impact and that formal measurement tools are only part of a suite of evidence. However, measuring levels of social action was inherently problematic including how to record small acts of social action. Identifying and measuring these 'softer' activities and outcomes were especially challenging. It was also important to acknowledge resistance to measurement especially where it could deflect from core elements of VCSE's work.

## Ideal approaches to social action

Participants in the VCSE and Commissioner discussion groups were asked to reflect on an *ideal* approach to social action if no restrictions existed. Across the groups some similar factors emerged:

- local democratic structures
- a place based approach
- is truly community led
- local authorities act as 'enablers' and broker relationships
- local authorities creating the right circumstances for social action to flourish
- shared city leadership
- deliberation
- addresses power imbalances through genuine collaboration and co-production
- builds trust and reciprocity
- provides safety and is proactive and positive (a 'can do' approach)
- has long term funding and resource commitment
- involves a culture change and changed political mindset
- is self-sustaining and sustains momentum (rather than losing energy through bureaucracy)
- shares knowledge
- happens organically and holistically (can't be engineered, it needs a 'spark' to initiate)
- values investment in evidence
- open to using social media effectively
- removes bureaucracy and barriers for participation
- offers incentives, rewards and shows appreciation to individuals
- supports communities
- has a clear focus and understanding

## Opportunities

Despite the challenges, social action was viewed as an opportunity to "re-balance" and "recalibrate" and there was optimism that social action should be the "norm rather than the exception". Participants agreed we need to continue to have these "difficult conversations". Moreover, there was consensus that there is a great deal of learning from why and how social action projects 'fail' and a benefit of the research project would be to share examples of success as well as failures. Participants agreed that it would be useful to examine failed projects and it would be refreshing to see a 'warts and all' approach as it is through sharing what works (and doesn't work) which helps others.

*"There's an opportunity now to re-create something quite exciting." (Participant from VCSE)*

## NEXT STEPS

The scoping discussion enabled the action research team to explore some of the key issues facing VCSEs and commissioners for growing social action. The next stages of the programme will investigate these issues further through a series of six local partnerships the research team will work closely with. The findings from these discussions have also helped inform three forthcoming workshop events planned around the following themes: “Building the Space for Social Action” (Stirchley Baths, Birmingham, 16 July 2018), “Learning to Let Go: Rethinking roles and changing mindsets” (TBC) and “Making Stories Count: What, Why and How should we evaluate impact from Social Action” (TBC). There will be opportunities to continue to share learning on social action through these workshops events but also the work of Champions linked to the project and a Peer Learning Network which will be developed.

Please contact a member of our action research team for further information and to be involved:

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