



Mosaic, jigsaw or abstract: getting a big picture perspective on the third sector in North East England and Cumbria – discussion summary

Exploring and describing what the third sector is, what it does and how, are now important research themes in the UK. And there is cross-party support for the policies giving the sector a central role in delivering public services, tackling social problems and strengthening civil society. But the concept of defining and dealing with a diverse range of organisations (including, for example, charities, community organisations, social enterprises, clubs and faith groups) as one sector, remains challenging and contentious.

Northern Rock Foundation's Third Sector Trends Study aims to provide detailed information about and analysis of the scale, role and dynamics of these diverse organisations in North East England and Cumbria, with a complementary strand covering Yorkshire and Humberside. In particular, the study aims to develop, test and share more effective research tools for studying the local organisations traditionally absent from official data. The first phase of the research commenced in April 2008.

In the first publication from the study, a team led by the University of Teesside reports the broad perspectives on the state of the sector in North East England and Cumbria, as seen by the main local, sub-regional and regional infrastructure organisations. The researchers asked infrastructure organisations to identify factors which they saw as assisting or hampering the third sector in their area. Drawing on the results, the report sets out the more general themes and issues which will be further developed, examined and tested during the course of the study. The report is intended to stimulate discussion, and the Foundation and the research team welcome feedback.

This study of infrastructure groups was place-based and highlights the local and regional perspectives more generally; as such, it supplements evidence available in research from other areas and national data.

The research presents for exploration three alternative ways in which the sector might helpfully be conceptualised, each with its own implications for how policy, research and practice at local or national levels might be framed:

- As a **mosaic**: suggesting that that the sector as a whole can be described as having characteristics of its own, made up of the sum of its distinctive and separate parts.
- As a **jigsaw**: assuming that the component parts of the sector fit together, and that there are useful connections between individual organisations which may be studied by researchers.
- As an **abstract**: here meaning depends on the point of view of the observer. The sector is seen in many different ways by people applying different sets of values and expectations. To those seeking clarity and order, it may be seen as chaotic.

- Infrastructure bodies in the study area do not have a shared view on their role in representing their sector as a whole, or in part. There is considerable variation in the extent, quality and currency of information they hold on the sector in their area.
- There is a general belief that grants are reducing in number and becoming harder to obtain and that contracts favour larger organisations.
- The sector in the study area is seen as weak at representing its own interests, including under-selling itself to beneficiaries, funders and the media.
- Organisations that are entrepreneurial, opportunistic, agile and well connected are thought to be doing best in the current climate.
- Monitoring and communicating performance, risk assessment, and capacity to manage legal and financial matters are seen as priorities for local and regional sector skills development.

Purpose and methodology

The researchers' aim was to identify topics and questions which could be the focus of the next stages of the qualitative work within the Third Sector Trends Study, and to explore what a 'big picture' perspective on the local sector at this stage might comprise.

To achieve this, the researchers began by interviewing chief officers of 29 main local, sub-regional and regional infrastructure organisations supporting the third sector across North East England and Cumbria. Key research objectives included identifying the role and relationships of these organisations, and the views of their chief officers on the issues facing the sector as a whole. The findings from the research are, therefore based on the interviewees' understanding and perspectives, and are presented as such. They may be challenged by further empirical investigation.

Findings

Local, sub-regional and regional infrastructure organisations

- Infrastructure organisations in the study area present a picture of diversity in themselves.
- There was considerable variation in their development and history: some dated back to the first half of the 20th century; others had been established in the last two years.
- Most of the organisations interviewed delivered common activities, e.g. advice on governance,

management and funding, training, dissemination of policy information, representation and back office support services.

- Some also ran or hosted projects which brought in a management overhead. Project work sometimes presented tensions internally or with competitors in the sector.
- There were differing views about the appropriateness and effectiveness of the representation role of the infrastructure bodies in the study area. Some cited a lack of capacity, others a limitation on what they knew, whilst others questioned whether one organisation could legitimately speak for the whole sector. However, in some cases, organisations had well-established formal mechanisms for representation and consultation.
- There was considerable variation in the extent, quality and currency of information which infrastructure organisations held about the sector in their area. Not all thought that maintaining comprehensive information or databases of local organisations was a priority; others did not have the funding or the capacity to do so.

Views on sector relationships in the study area

- Most of those interviewed were connected to local and sub-regional networks, and some to thematic networks.
- Most local infrastructure bodies thought their relationship with their local authority was crucial, although the quality of these relationships appeared to vary considerably.

- Local voluntary sector compacts were generally seen to be a good idea in principle, but some felt there was limited willingness or opportunity to challenge breaches.
- Partnerships and collaborations were viewed as working best when they were not forced. Interviewees were candid about problems arising from personality clashes, rivalries and infighting.
- Infrastructure bodies had concerns about alleged tokenism in the representation of the sector in multi-agency partnerships, boards and committees. Concern was also raised about the time commitment involved which was not resourced.
- Public sector officials were seen by many of the infrastructure bodies as having negative perceptions of the sector. The public sector was felt to lack understanding of how the sector worked or what it did. Some interviewees also stated that their own sector did not have a good understanding of the roles and limitations of statutory bodies.
- The local infrastructure bodies also generally thought that the private sector knew little about the third sector, but was indifferent to it, rather than negative.
- Interviewees thought that the general public had a positive view of the sector, but based on limited understanding.
- There was a good deal of consensus that the region's relative dependence on the public sector, and its historic paternalism, had influenced the development and nature of the sector. Some thought this had limited the sector's entrepreneurialism.

Views on funding issues in the study area

- For local infrastructure bodies, councils were key funders, although some received no funding at all from this source. There was heavy reliance on short-term funding, although some were able to generate income from renting office space or through paid-for services. Most interviewees were very unclear about their future funding levels.
- Some chief officers said that infrastructure bodies were forced to develop projects or to turn services into projects, in order to gain funding, since core infrastructure support attracted little interest from funders.
- Most interviewees thought that the current funding situation for the sector in their areas was challenging,

with the loss or decline of several funding streams, and uncertainties over public sector contracting. There was a generally held belief that grants were reducing in number and becoming harder to obtain, and that this would particularly harm smaller organisations.

Views on sector capacity and capability

- Most interviewees thought that their sector faced problems in getting the right calibre and range of trustees, and that the time commitments and liabilities involved put some people off. Interviewees also thought that many trustees did not fully understand their role, and were not properly trained or supported.
- Interviewees generally thought their sector was a good place to work because of high levels of job satisfaction, flexibility and autonomy. However, they also stated that conditions might be less favourable than in the public or private sectors and that career development could be more limited.
- The biggest disadvantage of jobs in the local sector was seen to be insecurity stemming from short-term funding, which also led to high levels of staff turnover. However, some interviewees thought this could help renew organisations and give employees a wider skills base.
- The consensus among interviewees was that there was a continued stream of people volunteering. Difficulties were reported around Criminal Record Bureau checks, benefit regulations, and poorly resourced volunteer recruitment and training.

Views on how the sector is faring

- There was no strong, consistent view about which parts of the sector in the organisations' areas were faring particularly well, although some interviewees highlighted very small and big organisations and some particular sub-sectors (e.g. social enterprises). Organisations that were doing well were characterised as entrepreneurial, opportunistic, agile and well connected.
- Whilst there was a general view from interviewees that the sector in their areas overall was suffering from a contraction of funding and increased competitiveness, again there was no single view about which organisations were faring worst, although some interviewees cited community facilities, community education and infrastructure bodies themselves.



Emerging research questions

From their interviews, the research team identified a number of key issues for further exploration within the Third Sector Trends Study.

- How are different types of organisations in the study responding to the culture of public service delivery? What are the experiences of these organisations with contracts, and how are their mission, culture and services affected? What is happening to those who choose not to engage in contracting?
- How do organisations in the study area attempt to measure performance and communicate achievements? What kinds of evidence convince stakeholders that their local sector is effective? Is innovation a driving force? Does pressure to freely share good practice place the local sector at a competitive disadvantage?
- What useful comparisons can be made between employment models in the third, public and voluntary sectors? Is the third sector's perceived tradition of low job security but high personal reward a strength or a weakness?
- How do value systems in the sector affect practice? Where do values come from, and how do they become rooted in organisational culture? To what extent are values shared or contested?

Next steps

The next stage of data collection by the University of Teesside team will involve:

- a longitudinal qualitative study of 50 local third sector organisations;
- the establishment of three 'foresight panels' across the study area which will act as a barometer on the wellbeing of the sector;
- a large-scale panel study constructed following the comprehensive mapping of the local sector in North East England and Cumbria work being done by the University of Southampton team.

More information

■ Northern Rock Foundation Third Sector Trends Study:

www.nr-foundation.org.uk/thirdsectortrends

■ Full report

Mosaic, Jigsaw or Abstract? Getting a big picture perspective on the Third Sector in North East England and Cumbria by Tony Chapman, Fred Robinson, Judith Brown, Sue Shaw, Chris Ford, Emma Bailey and Robert Crow, is available to download free of charge from the website above.

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This report is published as part of the the Foundation's Third Sector Trends Study. The views expressed, however, are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

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