

## **Title: Preparing a baseline from which to measure 'Big Society'**

### **Rationale and research context**

In this project, we propose to ascertain the data and methods required to establish a baseline for 'Big Society' in the UK and enable monitoring of its development. We refer to Big Society both literally and symbolically; literally because Big Society is a key component of the coalition government's approach to reshaping society in the UK, and symbolically because the idea that communities should lead and staff solutions to various social problems is currently "almost ubiquitous"<sup>1</sup>. Whichever party holds power in the UK in the foreseeable future, it is likely they will emphasise communities doing more for themselves.

In a 'Big Society', citizens and communities take a vastly increased role in managing, shaping and delivering social and physical infrastructure. The idea is closely allied to notions of community activism and civic participation, and thereby to concepts of social capital and social cohesion. The idea behind Big Society is that not only do social and community problems get 'fixed' without direct state intervention; those involved draw social and health benefits from their roles. There is already a large literature exploring such ideas including a focus on how these facets of community life can be created and measured, and on what impacts they may have on the health, wellbeing and sustainability of individuals and communities. The evidence for impact is mixed. Mitchell *et al* for example<sup>2</sup>, demonstrated that deprived communities in which collective community action took place showed greater resilience to the ravages of long term economic decline. In contrast, Mohan *et al* found little evidence that neighbourhood social capital exerted a beneficial effect on health outcomes<sup>3</sup>. Measurement of community participation, social support, social capital and civic engagement is well developed at the individual level. However, Big Society places a focus on geographically defined communities such as 'the neighbourhood' or 'your square mile'. Measuring and comparing community participation within neighbourhoods across the country is much harder and less well developed.

Existing literature provides compelling reasons for wanting to follow the progression of Big Society over time. The nature and size of social and environmental problems faced varies between communities. Some communities currently have greater levels of civic engagement than others, and some are probably better placed to begin or grow that kind of participation than others. If Big Society is to become a major route through which problems are solved and life in the UK is improved, it is essential that we understand who and where might benefit most, which communities might lead the way and which might need most help in adapting to the new policy. Monitoring where we start from, and where we go, is an essential component of this important change in the balance between citizens and the state.

The coalition government is still considering its own approach to monitoring and evaluation of Big Society, but it is encouraging external research to learn what impacts and effects these ideas have. If we want to learn whether a policy emphasis on Big Society changes participation in our neighbourhoods and communities, we need to know about how people currently participate. We also need to know this in a way which allows us to monitor how things may change. There is no contemporary picture of existing patterns of engagement, or indeed potential for engagement, across the UK. There is however, a range of existing methods for measuring and estimating levels of social capital or civic engagement within small geographically defined communities. The research team has experience and expertise at bringing together multiple data sets which describe the social, economic and environmental circumstances of local populations. This short project would prepare the ground for the production of a baseline measurement of Big Society for the UK.

### **Aims and objectives**

The wholesale creation of a baseline measure of community participation for all neighbourhoods in the UK is beyond the scope of the funding available. Our aim is to prepare the ground for a subsequent application to the Connected Communities programme, or similar funder. The objectives for *this* proposal are therefore to

- A) Identify sources of data on civic engagement, community participation, volunteering and community cohesion which either describe geographical variation in these characteristics across the UK, or which are suitable for producing estimates
- B) Consider the candidacy for each of the identified characteristics as a contributor to measuring 'Big Society', and determine the small-area units best suited to capturing 'community' in this context
- C) Identify the most suitable methods for deriving small area measures of community participation and action

### **Contribution to the Connected Communities Programme**

The Connected Communities Programme has community participation at its heart. Its context (as described in the programme flier) is the idea that policy makers are looking to communities to be more self-reliant. At the Connected Communities Summit, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) policy briefing highlighted the issue of establishing a baseline for Big Society; our contribution would seek to do this in a way that would be useful to government, but also to the community groups, local authorities, and other intermediary partners who are creating the Big Society. Our proposal is also probably in contrast to others in that we intend to explore and contrast community connections across the whole UK; exploring local characteristics, but at a national scale. We will offer an alternative perspective and scale of analysis to other submissions.

The proposal adds value to existing and previous research-council funded activities, bringing together teams who have worked on these ideas from very different disciplinary perspectives; epidemiology and social geography. In her ESRC funded work, Twigg has already gained experience in synthesising estimates of geographical variation in levels of social capital, however that work was focused on single indicators. Singleton has developed a range of bespoke and topic specific area-level classifications, combining multiple local indicators. In their work, funded by the ESRC and by NERC, Mitchell and Pearce have experience of generating measures and classifications of both social and physical environments, which also combine multiple indicators. The investigators have all explored and measured community characteristics, but with different techniques. The combination of varying disciplinary and methodological perspectives on measuring the social and environmental characteristics of communities would be innovative.

### **Description and timetable of activities**

We have opted for a short but intense project, with a dedicated senior research assistant. The planned activities reflect the 3 objectives. At the start of the project, the team will meet face to face in Edinburgh, to pool expertise and ideas, and to establish a protocol for appraising datasets we find in our search. The search itself will utilise existing databank resources, such as the ESRC data archive, and also examine academic and grey literature. We'll be looking for existing secondary data sets, for relevant indicators and for other data from which indicators can be estimated. There are existing searches to build upon; Twigg's work modelling social capital at small area level undertook this kind of search for example, but these are now out of date, were focused on England only and looked at a single indicator. Searching itself will be very rapid, but assessing the identified sources will take longer. This search and review process will take 2 months and will complete Objective A. Its results will be the fuel for objectives B and C, requiring discussion and debate within the team and then with stakeholders. Our experience suggests that presenting stakeholders with a proposed 'solution' and using this as a starting point for consultation will work better than starting by asking 'what do you think a measure of Big Society should contain?'. We will thus first produce a draft solution in-house, identifying which variables to include in our measures and how they might be operationalised, and perhaps combined, to measure Big Society. We will also need to establish our geographical definition of community and neighbourhood, weighing small-area data availability and theoretical perspectives in the process. Our draft solution will be produced via another whole team meeting in Portsmouth and additional virtual meetings using Skype. We will then identify named individual contacts in the stakeholder organisations, and once agreement is obtained, consult on our proposed solution via email, telephone and face to face. Our questions to prompt input from the stakeholders will be simple; is what we propose a reasonable measure of Big Society? What would its advantages and disadvantages be for your use? How can it be better? There is a potentially vast range of stakeholders and given the confines of the project we cannot include them all, or have detailed and prolonged input from

those we do include. Our selection will balance state and third sector interests and we propose to include DCLG, The Big Society Network, Volunteering Scotland and TimeBank. Consultation will lead to team-based refinement of the proposed measures and greater clarity about which aspects of Big Society can and cannot be measured via our approach. Finally, we will prepare a briefing report which describes our proposed measures and how we will build them, and an academic paper. Completing Objectives C and D, and the reporting will take 2 months. Once the project is finished, we will take what we have learned into a full application for funds to actually create and disseminate the measure.

### **Collaboration and engagement**

The research will be a collaboration between Mitchell, Pearce, Twigg and Singleton, bringing together at least four RC funded projects. Pearce and Mitchell are existing collaborators on a relevant NERC funded grant, which developed community level indicators of physical environment. Our named senior researcher, Richardson, was the RA on this project and has experience of the systematic data searching and appraisal process required. Mitchell was also PI on a second relevant grant; "Resilient populations: a geographical perspective". This was part of an ESRC-funded network focused on capability and resilience and had a specific focus on community cohesion and action as a source of resilience. Twigg has extensive experience in the measurement and modelling of neighbourhood level community participation and social capital measures, including projects funded by NICE and by the ESRC. Singleton is an early career researcher whose ESRC First Grant project explored and produced bespoke geodemographic community profiles. Mitchell and Pearce, and Pearce and Twigg, have worked together before, but the wider collaborations will be new. Engagement with stakeholders is a key part of the project, and was outlined above.

### **Management and co-ordination**

As PI, Mitchell will manage and coordinate the project, with Richardson (the RA) documenting progress and regularly reporting to the whole team. All team members will actively participate in each stage but Richardson will lead on the data search and appraisal and on the stakeholder consultation whilst Twigg and Pearce will lead on developing the methodology for the measure. We will use secure web pages for the sharing of results and papers during the project. Pearce will line manage Richardson as she is located within his department. Glasgow University will be the financial centre. Richardson will take the lead on drafting the project report and paper, with all other investigators having input.

### **Outcomes**

The primary outcome will be an application for further funding to complete the construction of the baseline measure of Big Society. The secondary outcomes will be a) a briefing report aimed at civil servants, politicians and other stakeholders, detailing our assessment of how the baseline and progress of Big Society should be measured and b) an article detailing our investigations and conclusions, submitted for publication in a peer reviewed journal. The report and our findings are likely to be of great interest to the coalition government, civil servants responsible for delivering Big Society, volunteering organisations and the third sector in general. Our stakeholder engagement will be a key awareness raising activity in itself, but we also intend to disseminate more widely once the project is complete. Previous experience has shown that it is best to allow stakeholders to advise on dissemination routes relevant to them. For example, presenting to stakeholders' existing in house seminar series is often a better route to reaching the audience than attempting to run a one off event at a university and inviting stakeholders to it. We have costed for travel to do this within the UK, but our time will not be charged. The briefing report will be made freely available on our website, and distributed to the stakeholders we consult via email for further cascading. We will press-release the work via the University of Glasgow press office.

### **References**

- (1) Twigg L, Taylor J, Mohan J. Diversity or disadvantage? Putnam, Goodhart, ethnic heterogeneity, and collective efficacy. *Environment and planning A* 2010; 42(6):1421-1438.
- (2) Mitchell R, Gibbs J, Tunstall H, Platt S, Dorling D. Factors which nurture geographical resilience in Britain: a mixed methods study. *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2009; 63(1):18-23.
- (3) Mohan J, Twigg L, Barnard S, Jones K. Social capital, geography and health: a small-area analysis for England. *Social science & medicine* 2005; 60(6):1267-1283.