Measuring the Big Society: Stakeholder consultation document

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Request to interested parties
This document sets out a draft proposal for measuring the baseline and future progress of Big Society at a local level. We would value your thoughts and comments on our approach, our selection of variables with which to measure the Big Society and the methods we propose to use to develop the measure. Please email any feedback to Dr Elizabeth Richardson at e.richardson@ed.ac.uk by **Friday April 22nd**.

Background

The UK government's vision is for a Big Society. Their intention is to offer communities the opportunity to take control of many public services, shifting power away from central government. In a Big Society, the focus is local; local authorities have greater powers over what happens in their area, and local communities have new rights to get more involved in public service delivery than ever before. The aim is that services will be organised from 'grass roots', tailored to local needs rather than being determined by a top-down one-size-fits-all approach. Big Society is underpinned by a hope that in taking power and responsibility, communities will reap benefits.

Community response to this challenge is unlikely to be equal. The social and environmental problems they face vary enormously, as does the availability of human resources to deal with such problems. Communities with a track record of civic participation and engagement might eagerly take up the offer made to them by the Big Society. Those with a lesser sense of 'community', perhaps because of time and financial constraints resulting from long hours and/or low wages, may find it more difficult.

Big Society is a central policy theme of the UK government, and, as with all major policy initiatives, it is important to monitor its progress. The 'Measuring the Big Society' project aims to develop a blueprint for capturing Big Society potential and progress at the community level. It is a collaborative project between researchers at the Universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Portsmouth and Liverpool and is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's 'Connected Communities Programme'. More details about the project and team can be found at www.cresh.org.uk
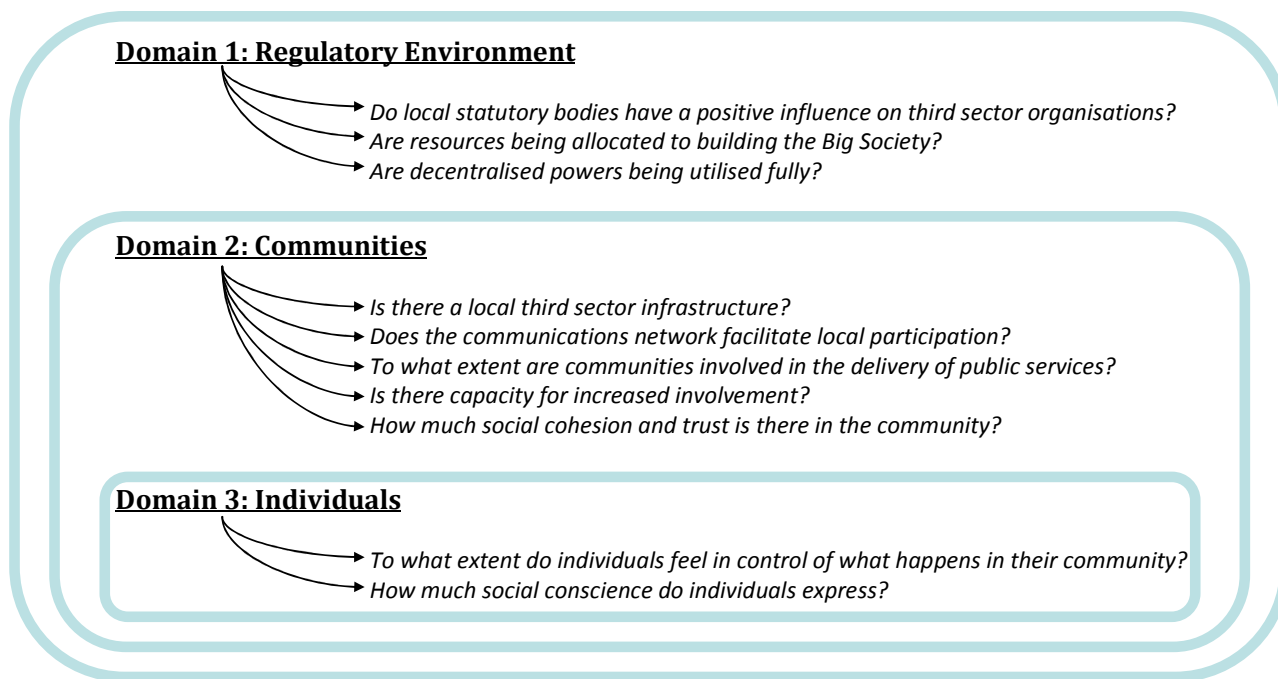
Aim

To ascertain the data and methods required to measure Big Society at a local level across the UK.

Methodology

We first asked "which characteristics will affect Big Society locally?" As Big Society is an emerging and evolving initiative we focussed on ideas from politicians, think tanks, the media and related academic literature. We subsequently asked "how can these characteristics be measured?" and "how could a single measure of Big Society be produced?" An intensive search for potential indicators followed. Datasets were appraised against pre-selected criteria: resolution, reliability, recent, repeatability, availability and UK-wide coverage. Strengths and weaknesses in the datasets were documented, and gaps were identified. Selecting a means of aggregating the indicators to produce a single measure was informed by user needs and our expertise in this field.

Findings

We identified many factors likely to influence community engagement with Big Society, operating at a range of spatial scales: the devolved administrations, local councils, communities and individuals. We identified three nested levels of influence ('domains') and ten specific influential characteristics ('subdomains') (see summary figure below). The domains and subdomains are described in more detail in the subsequent text, and potential indicator data are introduced.

Domain 1: Regulatory Environment
- *Do local statutory bodies have a positive influence on third sector organisations?*
- *Are resources being allocated to building the Big Society?*
- *Are decentralised powers being utilised fully?*

Domain 2: Communities
- *Is there a local third sector infrastructure?*
- *Does the communications network facilitate local participation?*
- *To what extent are communities involved in the delivery of public services?*
- *Is there capacity for increased involvement?*
- *How much social cohesion and trust is there in the community?*

Domain 3: Individuals
- *To what extent do individuals feel in control of what happens in their community?*
- *How much social conscience do individuals express?*

Domain 1: Regulatory Environment

By 'Regulatory Environment' we refer to statutory and operational circumstances; what powers are transferred or decentralised by law, and how does this work in practice? The Regulatory Environment will be important at the broadest scale. It will vary between the different administrations of the UK[1] and between local councils.

a. *Do local statutory bodies have a positive influence on third sector organisations (TSOs)?*
   The local regulatory environment can influence the third sector in many ways, including through the provision of funding or contract income, the provision of help, support and advice, and the forging of relationships and partnerships built on respect and understanding. In England, the percentage of TSOs rating the influence of local statutory bodies on the success of their organisation as 'positive' is available for each council (National Indicator 7) and is updated every two years, hence we propose using this indicator. However, no such data have been found for Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland.

b. *Are resources being allocated to building the Big Society?*
   Although Big Society is not a programme which brings new funding, there will be a requirement for councils to reallocate existing resources. In financial terms, the shift in public service delivery spending between each council and the third sector could be quantified using published council expenditure data (collated by OpenlyLocal.com). UK-

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[1] The Localism Bill will decentralise Big Society-relevant powers to local councils in England, but will have little or no effect on those in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, where many of these powers have already been devolved.

wide spending details are available but at present the data are not sufficiently comprehensive. At this early stage in the development of the Big Society, it is not possible to measure council provision of non-financial resources (e.g., meeting rooms, training and support), hence this is currently a data gap.

c. *Are decentralised powers being utilised fully?*
    Big Society powers (e.g., right-to-challenge and right-to-buy) will not be formally decentralised to councils until the Localism Bill is passed. It is uncertain how these powers will be operationalised or how the shift in rights and responsibilities could be measured. This is a current data gap.

Domain 2: Communities

Community has no precise definition; it means different things to different people. We are using it to refer to characteristics of local areas and populations. Inevitably, to measure something at a community level, a definition of 'local' will need to be imposed (discussed below).

At a local scale, community attributes will be important to the progress of Big Society. A supportive infrastructure will be needed for communities to organise and/or deliver public services. This might include organisations willing and able to rise to the challenge, and good communication channels so that residents could stay informed, learn from similar projects and get involved. The community will need a good sense of cohesion as well as willing, able and experienced members to facilitate this.

a. *Is there a local third sector infrastructure?*
    Communities where non-profit organisations are already at work will be better placed to challenge and bid for the running of their public services, and may reap benefits from these organisations' existing knowledge and experience. However, the spheres of influence of such organisations are known to be very difficult to measure. We propose that the local availability of key volunteering opportunities (e.g., working with children or people with disabilities) will provide a better indication of the presence or absence of a local third sector infrastructure. Over 1.3 million opportunities are currently advertised on the volunteering websites for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. (N.B. A measure derived from such data would have to be interpreted with care to ensure that it did not simply identify communities with greatest need or lowest uptake of voluntary positions.)

b. *Does the communications network facilitate local participation?*
    A community with a strong communications network will be well placed to coordinate the kind of civic participation that will characterise a Big Society. Forms of communication vary widely between and within communities: e.g., internet, social conversations, newsletters and notice boards. This makes measuring the strength of the local communications network difficult. The frequency of talking to neighbours within a community, for example, could be used as a proxy measure of its social network. Such data are available from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) which is a UK-wide, nationally representative, annual longitudinal survey. Community-level estimates of such 'neighbourliness' would be derived via models of BHPS data which take into account variations across different demographic groups in different types of geographical setting (e.g., different age and gender groups in more or less deprived areas). It is important that broadband connectivity is also examined as the internet is becoming an increasingly important tool for sharing information, experiences and best practice both locally and more widely. Internet connectivity could be measured by combining broadband signal speed data (UK-wide) with

behavioural data about the population's propensity to use the internet for getting local information (estimated based on responses to the Oxford Internet Survey).

c. *To what extent are communities involved in the delivery of public services?*
Communities will have a vastly increased role in managing, shaping and delivering their local public services in a Big Society. The prevalence of these activities in each community should be quantified to provide a baseline against which future changes can be measured. An assessment of the extent to which local services (e.g., libraries or meals on wheels) have been taken over by the community would be needed, although at present no data have been identified which tell us this. This is currently a data gap.

d. *Is there capacity for increased involvement?*
The community's capacity for greater involvement in local service provision will depend upon population characteristics. Increased volunteering may be more difficult in more socially deprived communities, where people are likely to work long hours in low-paid jobs. Using BHPS-derived models that take into account the individual and area associations of philanthropic volunteering, we propose to estimate the likely levels of potential for such activity across communities.

e. *How much social cohesion and trust is there in the community?*
Within a 'cohesive' community residents have shared values and a sense of belonging, and they form strong and positive relationships. More cohesive communities will be well placed to work together for the common good more effectively than those with weaker ties. It is not possible to measure cohesion directly, therefore researchers often use survey data (e.g., BHPS) to produce a summary of residents' opinions on related attributes. These include how much they agree or disagree with statements about their local area, such as: "I feel like I belong to this neighbourhood" and "the friendships and associations I have with other people in my neighbourhood mean a lot to me". We propose estimating community-level cohesion using the BHPS.

Domain 3: Individuals

Ultimately, if Big Society is to develop, the attitudes and behaviours of individuals will be crucial. To facilitate building a Big Society individuals will need a good sense of empowerment and a social conscience.

a. *To what extent do individuals feel in control of what happens in their community?*
Community residents will be empowered to do more for themselves in a Big Society. Taking the first step towards greater involvement in community matters will depend on whether people feel their input is valued and can help make a difference. We propose estimating perceived control over community affairs using individual level of agreement/disagreement with statements such as "I can influence decisions affecting my local area". However, we have not yet identified a suitable dataset that is both UK-wide and recent (e.g., General Household Survey = Great Britain only, and 2004/5).

b. *How much social conscience do individuals express?*
Along with the rights and freedoms offered by Big Society comes a responsibility to use them in a manner that benefits the wider community, not just the individual. Social conscience, or concern for the wellbeing of society, is demonstrated through an interest in what happens in the community and a willingness to participate in solving local problems. We propose estimating social conscience using BHPS respondent level of

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agreement/disagreement with the statement "I would be willing to work together with others on something to improve my neighbourhood".

Defining 'local'; what geography?

The definition of 'local' is determined to a strong degree by the availability of data. Data tend to refer to administrative units, which will not always reflect community boundaries. We intend to work at as fine a resolution as possible, with 'Lower Super Output Areas' (LSOA) ('Data Zones' in Scotland) our probable choice. These are small areas commonly used in UK work, and which number over 40,000 (average population = 1,400). The measure of Big Society could also be produced at larger aggregations of LSOAs if required, depending on user need.

Bringing the data together to make a 'measure' of Big Society

We rejected the idea of adding the subdomains together in some way to make a 'score'. Instead, we propose that the indicator data for each community be combined using a classification technique. In this way, communities which share specific characteristics (e.g., poor regulatory environment + relatively good community infrastructure and individual attributes) would be labelled (or classified) together. This approach recognises that building the Big Society is a multi-stranded effort and that the specific combination of strong and/or weak strands will affect progress within each community. We propose making the subdomain data available as separate indicators too so users may make their own combinations or examine indicators of interest.

Discussion

Given the relative infancy of the Big Society initiative it is unsurprising that there are a number of gaps and uncertainties in our proposal. These should be clarified as soon as the practical implications of Big Society become evident. We acknowledge that the Regulatory Environment domain is particularly weak and that further work to identify potential sources of data will be needed. The indicators we have selected are also not perfect, as our criteria were not always met, and the proposed use of estimates rather than direct measures has been necessary in some cases. Nonetheless our work has been based on a thorough and iterative process of review, feedback and discussion, and our proposal for measuring the Big Society at the community level therefore represents the most comprehensive possible in the circumstances.