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Community Anchor Organisations
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Introduction

What is a community anchor organisation? That is what this session is about.

My task today is to set the context and I have on either side two examples of community anchor organisations. Phil Knibb, the Director of Alt Valley Trust from in Liverpool, and Emma Tait, the Director of the Selby Centre in Tottenham, London. Both organisations have been in existence for over 20 years and for the most part they have operated below the radar. Since they agreed to be part of this workshop both have moved centre stage for different reasons. Alt Valley Trust is based in Croxteth, the neighbourhood where Rhys Jones lived and died. Selby Centre is BME led and therefore is at the heart of the debate currently raging over funding for single purpose organisations.

They will describe for you what they do and I will close by drawing together some over-riding threads.

So first something about the context.

Context

Community anchor organisations are a recent addition to the lexicon and I had a hand in developing the concept. For that you need to thank

Mary Doyle because she gave me a challenge back in the early 1990s. She said that my job was to look at what is taking place on the ground in communities, describe it and present it back to practitioners because they were so focused on what they were doing that they could not see the wood for the trees. And that is what I have been doing for the last fifteen years.

Within neighbourhoods and marginalised communities, there is a great deal of community activity that is unseen and taken for granted. It revolves around the people who live there are getting on with it themselves.

However, though large in total, most of the activities are small scale – and so it should be - but very rarely are they networked together and none are able to hold the external agencies – the local authority, the RSL or Almo, the health authority, local employers to account. These organisations have power over people's lives and their actions and inactions can have a detrimental effect on such communities. There is no one who has, as their job, the responsibility of championing the neighbourhood. Ward councillors try but they are one voice among many. So external initiatives come and they go, consultants arrive and disappear and nothing gets better.

But I also have observed that there are community-based organisations - some large some small, some new, some old, either singly or in clusters that create a hub of activities, drawing in people, making things happen that simply do not happen in traditional voluntary sector organisations. They engage with people in ways that public service providers would die for and the private sector is uninterested in. Often they grow out of frustration with external agencies to deal with the issues on the ground.

I have struggled as how to best describe something that is very powerful and also particular to the community sector. There is no easy answer. Some are development trusts but not all development trusts are anchor organisations. Some settlements act as community anchor organisations but not all do. Some schools do. Some faith based-organisations do and so do many community centres and village halls and community associations. These hives of activity can be found in rural, suburban and urban locations, from seaside resorts to the traditional manufacturing heartlands.

I first used the term 'local anchors' in a study I did for Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2001. The term 'community anchor organisations' was first coined in a piece of work that I did with Marilyn Taylor and Stephen Hill for the London Development Agency in 2001.

I had two images in my mind at the time. The first was of thinking of a neighbourhood as a marketplace of unseen social networks: a high street of community activities. Community anchor organisations are like the department stores that need to be there if a high street is to thrive. Lots of things take place within them and even more things take place around them. In the property world they are called 'anchor' stores.

The second image I had comes from sailing. All the sailing I ever learnt was in the pages of Arthur Ransome and *Swallows and Amazons*. But I do understand the purpose of a drag anchor. A drag anchor is put over the side in a storm. It does not go to the bottom. It hangs in the water. The boat can rise and fall on the waves and it can weather the storm – and as important it is not blown all over the place. Community anchor organisations fulfil that function in communities buffeted by changes that are beyond their control.

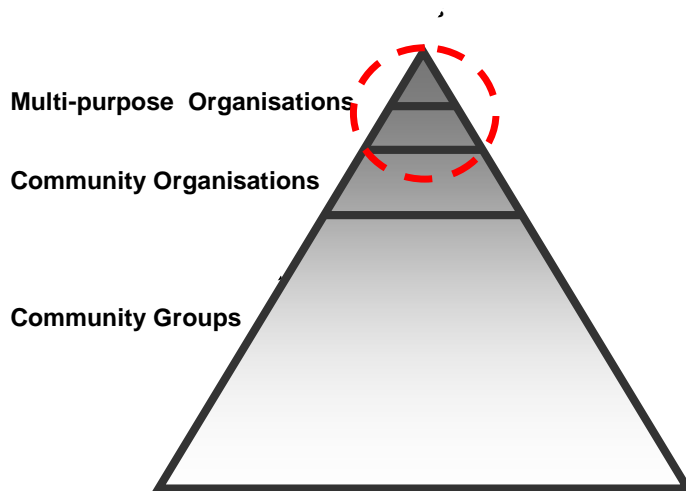
Having come up with a name, the idea has spread very quickly. I think that it has done so because it allows people in different part of the

country in organisations that are called different things to recognise in each other what they have in common. And if they don't necessarily band together – there is no organisation representing community anchor organisations – at least they don't feel so isolated. The interesting thing about Selby Centre and Alt Valley Trust is that they until recently did not think of themselves as community anchor organisations, and until they agreed to make their presentations today had not heard of each other.

In 2005, the Community Alliance was formed and has developed a campaign to establish a community anchor in every neighbourhood.

The phrase first appeared in Central Government's Firm Foundations, the Home Office's 2004 strategy for the future of the community and voluntary sectors in which Community Anchors were identified as a central building block.

Since then it has been increasingly used in government publications and speeches to the point where Hazel Blears yesterday said that the government was seriously considering making community anchors a major part of the DCLG's support for the Third Sector.



So something is afoot.

Before handing over to Phil, it is important to emphasise that community anchor organisations are not the community sector. They are only a small part of what takes place day in and day out up and down the country. Here is a typology that I prepared earlier. There are some 400,000 community-based organisations in the UK. The most numerous by far are community groups. They are as various and diverse as the human condition. Next come community organisations and then multi-purpose organisations. Community anchors are to be found among community groups that are large relative to their communities, networks of community organisations and multi-purpose organisations.

Today we are going to hear from two of them.

First, Phil Knibb from the Alt Valley Trust based in Croxteth on the outskirts of Liverpool.

Next, Emma Tait the Director of the Selby Centre, in Tottenham North East London.

Yesterday the Community Alliance launched its booklet on the contribution of community anchors up and down the country, entitled *An ever-evolving story* .

So what are the important components of a community anchor organisation? Here I am indebted to recent conversations that I have had with David Tyler of Community Matters and Dorothy Newton of the Scarman Trust.

First, a community anchor organisation needs to have a presence. We think of that as buildings - a building or a series of buildings or a series of buildings with open space – Alt Valley Trust owns and manages 100 acres of farmland and operates out of five buildings. But it might be and might well include virtual space such as worldwide web.

A community anchor organisation has to have open access. It costs nothing to enter. It might have a single point of entry, such as Selby Centre, or it may have multiple points of entry, such as Alt Valley Trust.

It has to be welcoming and to be able to create a safe environment

But also has to be non-intrusive and non-directional. If someone simply wants to come in for a cup of tea or play football or learn how to get onto the internet, that's good enough.

That does not mean that they do not have values or aspirations. They are driven by the desire that individuals, families, groups and communities achieve their full potential. So community anchor organisations need to be able to offer or to connect with an Aladdin's

Cave of activities that create endless pathways of self-growth and discovery.

Community anchor organisations, therefore, need to be alive to the possibility that once a newcomer feels comfortable and trust has been established, s/he might want to share confidences. They need to know how to respect those confidences and enable people to address issues that have been raised.

My sense is that no single organisation can provide all the needs, hopes and aspirations of everyone. So that my sense is that a community anchor organisation is a cluster of organisations, a network of organisations doing different things but with shared outlooks – joined at the mind. Both Alt Valley and Selby Centre are clusters of organisations – one on one site and the other on several sites. However, it does not preclude a single organisation or a single organisation with subsidiaries being an anchor organisation – just that it is very difficult. They need to facilitate the growth of other groups and organisations under their umbrella – rather than seeking to do everything themselves.

Community anchor organisations provide a space for differences to be celebrated and conflicts expressed. They provide places and activities where people learn about and respect 'the other' – young or old, men or women, residents or newcomers, black or white, whole or fractured. Social cohesion is not something that is imposed from on high but built up from the day-to-day.

Community anchors need to support and nurture the development of independent community groups in their localities. Indeed the key test of a community anchor organisation is that it does just that. ABL in Bradford has created a virtual endowment fund of £1.5 million which

allows it to distribute £55,000 each year to community-based organisations.

A Community anchor organisation is a living entity more than it is an organisation. Inside the front cover of the Community Alliance booklet *'An ever-evolving story'* there is a quote:

'It's like having an extended family. Community anchors are the constant in everybody's lives and there needs to be a constant in every community.'

That feels right. What a community anchor organisation does and how it does it is more important than what it is.

But what has brought community anchor organisations to centre stage.

In policy terms, we are in a profoundly different place the scale and complexity of which we hardly understand.

For how we have got into this position we need to go a bit further back. In the last 50 years we have seen, in this country, unimaginable increases in wealth. Few people in this room were alive in the late 1940s and early 1950s so they have not experienced the extraordinary levels of poverty that existed then. It is only when we see Andrew Marr's excellent recent series on the history of Britain or watch a film such as *Vera Drake* do we realise how far we have come.

However, that increase in wealth has not been evenly distributed and there has been enormous polarisation between the rich and the poor. Society has also changed. So we are witnessing the emergence of the 'new' poor - with high representations from old white working class and

BME communities - who are cut off from mainstream society and each other – physically, financially, socially and mentally.

This issue is not restricted to urban areas. The recent mapping exercise undertaken by the Young Foundation has assembled a staggering amount of data of the levels and diversity of unseen poverty and isolation that exists in rural areas. There are also marginalised groups (such as the young and the elderly) areas of poverty in affluent communities such as Cheltenham and Chichester where financial, environmental, educational, recreational and health inequalities pronounced.

Nature of Exclusion

Let us be clear. Exclusion is traumatic. Given the choice, you will do all in your power to avoid it. Over a period of time – and sometimes that period can be very short - the profile of a neighbourhood can be radically transformed. Those who can leave do and are replaced by those with little choice. People, who cannot move, stay put but disengage. As a consequence, there are places throughout the length and breadth of the UK where closing out the pain of daily existence is a sensible way of life – leading to further disengagement and the erosion of existing forms of social fabric.

The vacuum created is invaded by others. The participation in extreme activity – whether of the Right or Left, religious or secular – is also seen as a rational choice. For others, disorganised and organised crime is seen as a viable alternative to participation in the formal economy.

Dynamics of Stress

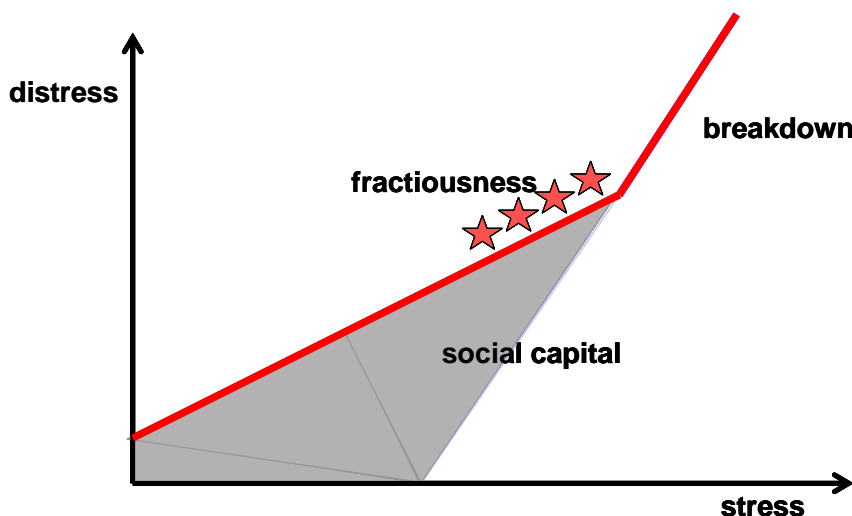
These neighbourhoods and communities are living with high levels of stress. We know from physical and biological sciences that metals

fracture under stress. Botanical and biological structures bend and break under stress. The same is true for individuals, families and neighbourhoods. They can all absorb stress until they reach a breaking point

However, there is a lag during which increases in stress do not show external evidence.

A tipping point occurs when the distress becomes acute and rapidly escalates. Why does it happen then? Why is it that in some neighbourhoods it happens later than in others? The answer lies in the wearing away of social capital – the networks and bonds that hold them together.

Police and public service providers recognise this situation. Over the years they have learnt to cope with situations where a breakdown in civil order, in families, in individuals takes place.



What they now have to address are neighbourhoods epitomised by community fractiousness – gratuitous vandalism, open use and abuse of alcohol and drugs, drug dealers taking over the homes of vulnerable

tenants, changing alliances of young people who graze, and sometimes raise, a neighbourhood before moving onto somewhere else. I have heard it described as 'slow riot'

Traditional drivers under threat

In the past, social cohesion has been built around three pillars: the work place, the family and faith. All have experienced massive change over the last 50 years.

Workplace

Many of the manufacturing industries where work place/work based community activities have been most deeply embedded have gone. Those industries that have thrived have jettisoned their commitment to community. It does not contribute to the bottom line.

Family

The growth in the UK economy during the last quarter of the 20th century was largely built upon the greater participation of women in the labour market. That has brought enormous benefits in terms of equality and growth of income - but at a cost. Family life is hollowed out. For those in work life is precarious with little time for community activities. In families without work or on low incomes, life is hard. Simply getting by is energy draining and a full time occupation.

Faith

Faith communities have been a third pillar of community activity. The last 50 years have seen a massive commercialisation and secularisation of society. Congregations have aged and declined to such an extent that churches struggle to keep their doors open and their roofs weathertight. There is little energy for community activity and outreach.

It is important to support a social responsibility within the corporate sector, help families survive in a much more demanding world and recognise the contribution made by people of faith. However, they have not been able to withstand the strains placed upon them in a changing economic and social environment.

The riots that rocked Oldham, Burnley, Bradford, Leeds, Birmingham, Leicester and Reading in 2003 were a wake up call to the Blair government that the unrest of previous decades was solely a response to the policies of the Conservative governments of Thatcher and Major.

The publication of the Power Report last year indicates a striking level of disengagement. At the same time the government's ability to deliver against existing commitments is still being tested. These commitments mean that there is limited scope for raising additional revenue. There is little trust that existing institutions will be able to respond effectively. Nevertheless, change continues to be rapid and unpredictable.

The subsequent bombings and attempted bombings in London on 7th July in 2005 and in London and Glasgow earlier in the summer and the shootings of children by children that have taken place in Birmingham, London and Liverpool have taken the violence of alienation to a different level.

That is why communities have moved centre stage and community anchor organisations have shot to prominence from apparently nowhere.

Government Frenzy

Since last summer, the Government has rebranded the Voluntary and Community Sector as the Third Sector and, like Wallace and Gromit in the *Wrong Trousers* laying down track in front of itself at breathtaking

speed, has created new departments, policies and programmes as if there is no tomorrow.

The Office of the Third Sector has been created in the Cabinet Office and it produced a consultation document and an action plan before the year was out. The Social Exclusion Unit has been given a new lease of life, pulled back up from the ODPM and re-elevated to the Cabinet Office. The ODPM itself has been reconfigured as the Department of Communities (in large bold letters) and Local Government (in a diminutive font almost as an after thought). The communities' functions of Home Office have been split off and divided between the Cabinet Office and DCLG.

If that was not enough, the new Local Government White Paper puts flesh on the bones of the newly minted concept of 'double devolution'. The Treasury along with the Cabinet Office has launched a review of the Third Sector which produced its interim report just before Christmas and this summer when everyone was on holiday published its 'final' report.

But there is a danger that what is good about the community sector will get washed away in the flood of Ministerial enthusiasm. Let us be clear what you have been developing out of the limelight is both special and powerful but it is also vulnerable.

In truth as a society we are grappling to find an effective way of enabling communities and neighbourhoods to thrive in a vastly changed world. The challenge is to create an infrastructure that can withstand the pressures and demands of living in areas of extreme stress. We are trying to create something that is sustainable in areas where others have failed or what they have tried has fallen to bits in their hands. We

are dealing with emergence; it is a period of great creativity and change.

I have looked at practice across large swathes of Northern Europe and USA, this is a worldwide issues. Emerging practice in the UK knock the socks off what is happening elsewhere. People in this room are world leaders in terms of generating new practice. No wonder government is interested in what you are doing.

You need to be bold about what is being achieved and humble about the scale of what confronts you. Nobody has all the answers and we need to be cautious when listening to those who claim to have. It is important that practice on the ground is allowed to develop and is not hijacked to meet some new priority or to fit into some externally created model of what a community anchor organisation is. Also funders need to be keenly aware that at the hint of money organisations that hunt money will, like sharks, appear from nowhere claiming to be that which they are not. Also at the hint that power might be shifting elsewhere there is a danger that existing agencies will create their own look-a-like organisations and divert money away from independent community-based organisations.

Now is time for discussion and dialogue. Also the community sector and those who represent it must not promise more than can be achieved.

Let me say I believe that there is an important role for community anchor organisations. If over the next 10 to 20 years it is possible to create 3,000 community anchor organisations in neighbourhoods and with communities that need them, that will be a massive achievement. The Secretary of State should establish an independently chaired steering group to over see this important development. It cannot be left

to civil servants and Ministers – they and their agendas move on. In all due deference to Bill Shankly, this is more important than football.

Thought also needs to be given to how such a programme is to be delivered. It has to be delivered locally and that precludes central and regional government. It needs to be independent so that would preclude local authorities. It also has to be an agency for which this is their core business. Just as communities need community anchor organisations to be their champions so community anchor organisations need to have a champion. I think that therefore precludes the Big Lottery. This would narrow the field to Futurebuilders – which is championing community-based organisations to deliver public services – or the Adventure Capital Fund – which is championing medium to large sized community-based organisations to become sustainable.

Investment in community anchor organisations has to be part and possibly a small part major investment programme in the community sector generally. If it is at the expense of doing nothing about the myriads of smaller organisations that in total deliver far, far more than anchor organisations can ever hope to achieve, then this initiative will have failed. If by investing in community anchor organisations the air is sucked out of other community groups in a neighbourhood this initiative will have failed. It is the role of community anchors to be in the forefront of that campaign to bring additional resources to their communities.

If the Thatcher Years were about investing in the private sector, the Blair years were about investing in the public sector, the next 10 years has to be about investing in the Third Sector. The scale of the investment required puts it beyond the ability of central government alone to fund. To rebuild our fractured society will take decades and involve the whole of society. The government's role is to establish good

practice and put in place longer term funding streams. That is why the proposals of the Commission on Unclaimed Assets to use the dormant accounts held by banks and other financial institutions to create a social investment bank are both timely and relevant.

Finally, great narratives have been built up around the subject. Books and poems, songs have been penned on it. Films have been made about it and wars have been fought over - the Holy Grail. The Holy Grail has its secular forms. Alchemists tried to turn base metals into gold. When I was in housing the Holy Grail was to build rented housing without subsidy. In the community sector the current Holy Grail is to create self-sustaining community-based organisations in multiply deprived neighbourhoods. As they would be seen to be self-supporting, local authorities, regional government, central governments, external charities and foundations might feel that their obligations to support them had been fulfilled. That would allow them to close the book on this particular issue – problem solved - and get on with their 'real' lives. They would never have to re-enter places where they never wanted to go to in the first place.

Community activity has always been paid for. We just did not see the cost. With the collapse of work based and faith based community activities and the hollowing out of the family, we can see the consequences in the terms of erosion of social fabric. Society is now reliant on community-based organisations to fill the void. As a society we need to recognise that we are going to have to pay to make good the years of neglect and to help the sector grow. If we don't the litany of civil unrest that has been a constant backdrop since the 1950s will remain.

Stephen Thake

20th September 2007