Community involvement at the local level in an age of austerity

In this time of austerity, not only do local authorities have less money to spend on their existing services but they will also have to plan for a future where there will be increased demand for services from an increasing and aging population.\(^1\) In order to meet this challenge, local councils are currently focusing their attention on three key areas:

- Out-sourcing services which have typically been run by the council
- Merging corporate and back office functions with other councils
- Cutting or reducing the provision of non-statutory services

Merging back office functions can provide councils with significant cost savings. A recent survey showed that nearly three-quarters (74%) of Finance Directors said they were thinking of merging services with other councils in order to make cost savings.\(^2\) Out-sourcing services to the private sector has also become increasingly popular and councils such as Suffolk are planning on becoming so called ‘virtual authorities’ as they outsource all but a handful of their services.

Previous research that 2CV have conducted has shown that many residents are largely uninterested as well as generally unaware about the specific detail regarding how these services are provided, and are happy as long as provision continues to exist. It is the reduction in non-statutory services that, for many people, will be the most tangible manifestation of the cutbacks. One of the government’s key aims for the Big Society in minimising the effects of the cutbacks is to try and engage community groups to help boost public services: in effect the ‘Big Society’ will only succeed if it is adept at engaging people from the ‘little society’.

However, many people who have attempted to get involved in the past have reported that the ‘customer experience’ when becoming a volunteer can be quite poor. Many people report that the rewards are frequently not as expected, that their skills are not utilised effectively and it can be hard to fit what they are asked to do around other commitments. If increasing levels of community involvement are to be forthcoming and prove successful these key issues will need to be addressed.

Understanding volunteers and community involvement?

Person-to-Person marketplaces are one of the ways which the volunteering marketplace is being transformed, encouraging it to grow, to be more flexible, rewarding and accessible. These web

\(^1\) Keep it REAL Responsive, Efficient, Accountable, Local services (2011) LGA
\(^2\) Local Government’s Response To The Cuts, Localis (2010)
based time management tools are providing the potential for public bodies to tap into the latent social enterprise present within communities. By mobilising voluntary resources within a community in this way, resources can continue to be focused where they are needed most with the outcomes staying focused on improving the service users receive.

Those people who have the inclination to become volunteers tend to be socially minded. However, it is important to remember that they can also be quite individualistic in their outlook and therefore ‘getting involved’ needs to attract them at a individual, as well as a social level. If the volunteering marketplace is to grow and take on more responsibility in terms of running public services, then organisations who would want to see this happen will increasingly need to understand what drives behaviour and what motivates people if they are to provide the appropriate support.

As research professionals who work across the public and private sectors, we have noticed that the public’s perspective can be quite variable, solely on whether they are primed to approach a topic from the standpoint of a citizen or a consumer.

In social research, ‘citizens’ are frequently expected to justify their perspective and preference in a public setting where there is typically a strong expectation (either because it is self-imposed or socially desirable) that an individual will first consider what is best for the public good. This moralizing effect can lead those who take part in social research to subconsciously constrain their self-interest for the duration of the research and temporarily put greater emphasis on considering the public good.³

In market research, ‘consumers’ tend not suffer from the same constraints and, while there can still be effects caused by social desirability issues, they frequently make decisions based on false empirical beliefs, morally repugnant inclinations and self-interested preferences.⁴ When discussing social issues, people will bury these factors and exhibit a more rational, ‘citizen’ perspective, although the ‘individualistic’ consumer persists at a deeper level and will drive actual behaviour. From our perspective this results in people who (convincingly) say all the right things about wanting to get involved, even to the extent where they have convinced themselves, but have no serious intention of ever volunteering.

A Case study: Entrepreneurial spirit on the Isle of Wight
So, how can we understand people’s social perspective when reported behaviour can so often prove unreliable? The key to delivering useful, action-orientated insight in citizen involvement is to

³ Deliberative democracy and social choice (1992) D Miller
⁴ Think Think, Nudge Nudge: Two Strategies for Changing Civic Behaviour (2011) Stoker et al
recognise what will drive behaviour at an emotional level with people paying less attention to what is beneficial solely for them and instead looking at what is beneficial for them within their community.

Examples of the potential to tap into a community’s energy and unleash a social entrepreneurial spirit can be found happening at a micro level around the country. Like many other local authorities, the Isle of Wight County Council had identified the library service as a potential opportunity for making cost savings. The council had been clear with residents that it wasn’t looking to make closures but that it had to reduce funding and that it was looking for expressions of interest from the community to work in partnership to run several, less utilised libraries.

One of the libraries that would have been replaced with a mobile service was in Niton, a small rural community on the southern tip of the Island. At a local meeting chaired by the council, local residents, although upset, were very forward in expressing interest in taking on the day to day running of a community library. The council then worked with local individuals to form a management committee which has subsequently taken on the operation of the library.

Since being taken over, volunteers’ passion for the library has rejuvenated it. The library has had a series of renovations and upgrades which offers enhanced facilities and overall usage of the library is up. The council is now using this model to keep the other libraries open and increase service provision on the Island. The council is also advising and sharing knowledge with other local authorities who are interested in adopting the same model.

**What has been learned and how can we use this information?**

Clearly, the library was considered by many to be a very important part of the community, it was well integrated with the local primary school and offered a range of services that appealed to people of all ages and social groups as well as offering a neutral meeting space. The library was, and continues to be considered an essential part of village life which ‘enables residents to live locally, successfully’.

However, why was it that these community benefits enough to attract the commitment in Niton where other communities on the Island were resigning themselves to legal action or closure? At an individual level there were a number of drawbacks people needed to reconcile. Firstly, there was the time that anybody who volunteered would need to give up to run the library on a day to day basis, not to mention the time and effort that was needed to get the whole thing set up.

Additionally, the library needed to be community funded, which required further time commitments in the form of organising fundraising events as well as taking on the inevitable financial burden.
While the commitment required was substantial, the potential loss to the community was perceived as too significant to risk losing the library. For children, Niton library is the only library within walking distance and parents saw their choice as one of keeping the library open or ‘making do’ with a mobile lending service or driving several miles. Many of the parents also regarded the library as a place that their children could initially become engaged with books and reading.

For others, the library was regarded as a hub of their activities providing employment information, a cultural centre as well as a neutral meeting place. These were considered to be essential to maintaining an effective village life and could not be replaced by another of the Island’s libraries or a mobile service. Essentially, the library was seen as one of the tools necessary to live rurally and a factor for many in deciding to live in the area.

So while ‘on paper’, it would have been reasonable to expect individuals to have behaved more selfishly, on this occasion self-interest was offset by influential local figures, council support, a motivated and organised community and clear benefits for all in maintaining village life.

**Value of insight**
The real value of any insight work is when it can provide a ‘recipe for success’, a list of generalisable actions that can be repeated elsewhere in order to provide a similarly positive outcome. In the case of the Isle of Wight, research we undertook with stakeholders uncovered a clear ‘method for success’ which can make it easier for local authorities to roll the process out elsewhere.

**Be honest and clear about what you want and the decision making process from the outset.** The Isle of Wight County Council built trust with communities by being clear about what they were planning to do and backing up proposals with data from a joint strategic needs assessment. This helped people understand why the changes were necessary. This didn’t appease communities but did strengthen the council’s position in the eyes of the community and was central in the outcome of the judicial review.

**Focus first where you’re most likely to succeed.** The community in Niton has been described as moving almost instantaneously from a sense of bereavement about the loss of the library to a desire to take ownership. While Niton continued to support a judicial review it was primarily focused on taking the local library over. The community in Niton already managed the village hall for a number of years so were experienced and confident in taking on this level of commitment.
Identify and engage stakeholders. In the case of Niton Library, public meetings highlighted that there was potential for the service to be run and funded by volunteers. Of all the communities where libraries were earmarked for closure, Niton’s did not get hung up on a sense of loss and quickly moved on to thinking about ownership of this local service. A community library is essentially a business and therefore identifying those within the community who have the appropriate acumen and drive to progress such a venture should be a priority.

Identify if an alternative model for the provision of the service already exists. Early on in the process, the council worked collaboratively with Buckinghamshire County Council and the Friends of Little Chalfont Library, who had undertaken a similar project in 2006. This provided the project with an existing ‘tried and tested’ framework which it could use to help establish the best approach to setting up the new library. However, experience of running the village hall was invaluable demonstrating how knowledge gained one area can easily be transferred to another.

Find a flavour of change that suits the community. The service has to reflect the fine grain of what suits the customer base. Opening hours and services provided have to reflect what the community needs and is able to deliver. Differences in community dynamics mean that one size will not fit all. Niton is a small community with a fairly static population and residents who know each other well, with many working in the immediate area. While the model Niton have employed may suit similar communities, larger, more diverse and dynamic areas will require a fresh perspective on the problem. In these instances, tools such as person to person marketplaces could prove a useful method to form the sort of networks of communication that have proved so critical to success in Niton.

Get the right volunteers. As well as being engaging and fun, volunteers should be made aware that taking ownership of a public service such as a library will be a long term commitment. Having the right volunteer coordinator will help ensure that volunteer resources are properly selected and organised. Additionally, getting volunteers to sign a symbolic contract will not only ensure that they give proper consideration their commitment but will also reduce churn. This is a tactic that has been employed successfully in schools for several years, setting out clearly what will be expected of students and the support they can expect in return. In both Niton and Little Chalfont the key to success was recruiting people with time and the correct skills.

Deliver an on-going programme of training and support. Although volunteers may be very keen, quality and capability will vary within and between communities. This can be addressed to some degree by providing a consistent level of training and support that helps to safeguard a consistent
minimum level of service. This also ensures that those withdrawing from volunteering can more easily be replaced.

**What can 2CV do for your organisation?**

2CV has a wealth of experience undertaking insight work for central and local government as well as the private sector. Our areas of expertise include local transport, youth and young people, health and wellbeing and communications development.

We work with a number of public sector organisations including Transport for London, DoH, DfT, Southwark Council, Westminster Council, DECC, DfID, FSA, HMRC and the School Food Trust. We also work with some of the World’s most famous brands including Nokia, Vodafone, BBC, Toyota, EA, Adidas, Sony and Ebay.

We would be happy to come and talk to you and your colleagues about what we have learned regarding social entrepreneurship and community run projects and how our learning can be applied in your area. For further information or to arrange a meeting please contact Richard Stockley on 020 7655 9900 or by email on rich.stockley@2cv.co.uk.