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Little big societies: micro-mapping of organisations operating below the radar

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Abstract

This paper reports on research to develop and implement an innovative methodology to find and map what lies beneath the third sector radar. By using and adapting tools used in the 1990s for the well-recognised work of LOVAS (Local Voluntary Activity Surveys) we sought to identify all community activities in two small local areas of England. This revealed a diverse range of 58 self-organised activities going on in and around 11 streets of England – groups that do not appear on regulatory listings and thus tend not be included in wider statistical trend analyses on the third sector. Six 'types' of below-groups were identified from the study. Most were embedded into their local community and operated within a very specific socio-cultural context delivering services to their immediate local communities.

Our findings also revealed a combination of ways in which groups obtain resources from their own users by 'tapping in', and obtaining resources from others, 'tapping out'. In addition, the work shows that several of these groups are also distributing resources to others, 'giving out'. The findings also highlight the importance of the opportunities arising from publically shared-spaces and the support from paid and unpaid staff operating in the buildings that they use.

Keywords

Acknowledgements

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1. Introduction

'Below the Radar' is a shorthand term for small voluntary organisations, community groups and semi-formal and informal activities in the third sector (Phillimore et al. 2010), more traditionally known as the 'community sector'. Despite its recent prominence in third-sector parlance, it is a hotly contested term: not only to do with criticism on the negative connotations associated with the lexicon, but also to do with the different ways in which it is conceptualized (McCabe and Phillimore 2009 and McCabe et al. 2010). Illustrating these, in their literature review on below-radar groups and activities, McCabe et al. (2010) outline concerns in which the term can be interpreted to imply a 'deficit model' with negative assumptions on what it means to be 'below the radar' and identify different approaches that are used to define what constitutes below-radar (third sector) groups. One example is the approach of absence from regulatory lists; that is, groups that do not appear on regulatory lists such as those groups that are not registered charities with the Charity Commission and as Community Interest Companies. Another example is the approach in which annual income is used to indicate 'small' and, thereby, below-radar groups.

Even when confined to any one approach, there still remain differences on what constitutes on- and below-radar groups. For example, in the case of work that adopts an approach of 'absence', Mohan (2011) notes 'formidable' challenges in matching information between local listings and administrative records both in terms of the quality of local listings and the definitional boundaries used for what is included from these. More so, he notes that this has contributed towards varied estimated-ratios on the size of what is on- and below-radar:

> … in terms of entities with at least some recognisable degree of organisation, the numbers of third sector organisations might vary by a factor of as many as nine' (Mohan 2011: 4).

Equally, McCabe et al. (2010) note that different researchers use different amounts of annual income to demarcate what is on-and below the radar; subsequently leading to variable results.

In developing TSRC's research strategy on this part of the sector, McCabe and Phillimore (2009) acknowledge and build on these contestations by introducing the notion of different types of radar, including: support-, policy- and influence radars. In doing this, the authors argue that additional dimensions beyond 'registered' groups – which they more accurately refer to as on the 'bureaucratic' or 'regulatory' radar – allows the inclusion of other groups that may struggle to access, for example, resources (human, financial and capital) as a result of (lack of) status, influence and recognition by statutory agencies (see also McCabe et al. 2007).

Setting aside detail on types of radar, variations of demarcation and (guess)-estimates on the size of the below-radar population, there does seem to be some consensus that cumulatively at least below-radar groups are likely to constitute a substantial and possibly even the largest proportion of the wider third sector. Furthermore, that despite their weighting, in number at least, scholastic discourse has tended to focus on the more formal part of the third sector (Clark et al. 2010 and Phillimore et al. 2010).

There is, however, well-established longstanding narratives based on anecdotal evidence and 'received wisdom' on the 'distinctiveness' of this part of the sector compared with its more formal 'mainstream' counterparts (McCabe 2011). In an early TSRC study, detailed analyses from depth-interviews with policymakers, practitioners and researchers who are considered experts in this field was used to examine narratives on 'distinctiveness' and, more broadly, on the concept of BtR (Phillimore et al. 2010). Findings show that despite diverse reports on BtR groups' function, support and trajectories, there are overlapping themes on distinctiveness. In particular, to do with the tendency for groups to work on focused interests – whether this is geographically-bound at neighbourhood level or a common interest and need; blurred boundaries between the personal, the political and civil action; and the ways in which groups source from within, whether this is expertise, social networks and to obtain money (Phillimore et al. 2010). Using data generated from TSRC's piloted micro-mapping study on below-radar groups and activities, this report echoes some of these findings. TSRC is also carrying out work to further explore how skills, knowledge and resources are gained and shared between small community-based organisations and activities. For further information on this, see: http://www.tsrc.ac.uk/Research/BeloweRadarBtR/Familytrees/tabid/731/Default.aspx

Despite shifting use of terminology, government interest in this part of the third sector is far from new: there is a myriad of policies across different administrations that are relevant to BtR third sector activity. These include BME community organisations' engagement with community cohesion agendas (Harris and Young 2009), supporting grassroots economic development in excluded neighbourhoods as well as the involvement of community-based organisations in modernising local governance, community safety and health planning and policy (Phillimore et al. 2010 and McCabe 2011). Alongside these include investment in developing the capacity of small organisations to engage with policy and service delivery, including community empowerment networks and Regional Empowerment Partnerships (McCabe et al. 2010)

Based on early findings from TSRC's work, we suggest that BtR groups and activities are likely to appeal to the current Coalition government's interest on the role of community-based activity and 'social action' – one of the three main policy strands for 'building a Big Society' (http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/content/big-society-overview). Reporting on this little-studied part of the sector is particularly timely: by building on stakeholders' narratives and findings reported in this paper, we suggest that there is already a Big Society in operation; and that this can be considered as an amalgamation of existing BtR groups and activities. The relevance of this work is further amplified given the wider social, economic and policy environment that is characterised by unprecedented public spending cuts following the 2008 economic crises, furthering the localism agenda and increasing politicisation on the role of communities to be part of building the 'Big Society'.

Focus in this paper is on findings from TSRC's piloted micro-mapping project, hereon referred to as the street-level mapping project. The aim of this study is to identify types of 'uncounted' BTR groups; more specifically those below the 'regulatory' radar. This is part of TSRC's wider research agenda within the Below The Radar (BTR) work stream, which aims to further empirical understanding specifically of small, informal and semi-formal groups and activities through a series of key research questions, including:

- What do BTR groups, activities and organisations look like? What is their role and function and how do they operate?
- Is it possible to more accurately quantify BTR groups and their contribution to civil society?
- What are the motivations of those involved in BTR groups and activities?
- What is the life cycle of BTR organisations and how do those active in them learn and develop?
- What is the impact of more informal community action and organising?
- What is the relationship between BTR groups, the formal third sector and government policies?

2. Mapping the below-radar third sector

Much statistical analyses on the third sector is drawn from administrative records collected for other purposes, such as the Charity Commission register of recognised charities in England and Wales or the register of Companies Limited by Guarantee in Companies House (see, for example, Clark et al. 2010 and Backus and Clifford 2010). Whilst knowledge from these contribute towards understanding an important part of the sector, it is only part. With claims that the majority of the sector does not appear on official lists combined with assertions on their 'distinctiveness', there has been recent interest to capture those 'uncounted groups' that do not appear on the 'official-listing' radar so to speak. Two recent examples include a pilot study commissioned by the then Office for the Third Sector (renamed the Office for Civil Society) located in the Cabinet Office (Ipsos MORI 2010) and, what is to date the largest of its kind in England, research by the Third Sector Trends Study (TSTS) commissioned by the Northern Rock Foundation (Mohan et al. 2011).

Both studies go beyond official records by comparing listings collated from local agencies with that of regulatory lists to identify what groups are on- and off- the 'regulatory' radar. Again, analysis is driven from data gathered using secondary sources collected for other purposes. Authors from the TSTS study note, however, that it is the very small informal groups that are least likely to be captured in local listings (Mohan et al. 2011) – a view echoed by other scholars who have undertaken systematic analyses on different types of listing (see, for example, work in the US by Grønbjerg and Clerkin 2005).

Attempting to move beyond official and semi-official sources, TSRC developed an innovative methodology to complement this work for the piloted 'Street-Level' Mapping Project (SLMP), which involved going out on the streets to see what lies beneath these third sector radars. The search approaches are set out in the next section and have been adapted from the well-documented and renowned work of the LOVAS study (Local Voluntary Activity Surveys) carried out in 1994 and 1997, commissioned by the then Voluntary and Community Unit of the Home Office (Marshall 1997).

In the case of LOVAS, the aim was to map and subsequently survey the entirety of 'volunteering' that extended to six sectors (Marshall 1997). Adopting and adapting these tools for our own research purposes has the (potential) appeal to capture below-radar groups and activities beyond regulatory and local listings. In particular, those little-studied small and very informal groups that may not, for example, have an address or even a name and that may not have any reason to appear in any listings. As will be discussed in detail further on, there is evidence to show a diverse range of activity going on beneath the radar. Furthermore, findings reveal innovative and flexible ways in which several groups generated and distributed resources – financial and human capital.

3. 'Street-level' mapping

3.1. The aims

By using street-level searches akin to those used in the LOVAS study, the purpose of our piloted 'Street-Level Mapping Project' was to find all organisational activity that is taking place in small local areas. The specific commitment was to go beyond existing records and listings of third sector groups to seek out activity that might not be listed, that might not have an address and even a name – in other words, those that tend to go 'uncounted', the 'hidden' population.[1]

In addition, other aims for the SLMP are:

- to build a (sub-)population for further, more detailed research enquiry;
- to explore the feasibility of the 'street-level' searches; and
- if there is sufficient interest, to develop a toolkit for others to use in their own research- and practitioner-led work

This work sits within a contentious debate on whether 'mapping' below-radar groups is feasible and even useful, with interpretation that this is yet another 'stone-turning counting exercise'[2] to compete on who can produce the highest estimated ratio between regulatory organisations and those beyond the radar. For this work, at least, estimating the sector was not considered appropriate and some of this is outlined in Section 3.2.4.

Instead, along with other approaches used to map below-radar populations, TSRC is interested in exploring the feasibility of the SLMP for purposes that go beyond scoping and even testing 'distinctiveness'. There is interest, for example, in developing tools to make different sections of the wider third sector more visible to allow further empirical understanding on their role, capacity and contribution within the wider third sector and society at large. And, perhaps, to ask even more fundamental questions on, for example, the extent to which the wider political and economic environment might impact on them. For example, if – *hypothetically* – they do not rely on external financial resources, does this then mean that they are immune from public spending cuts? Or, will there be knock-on effects for those that rely on others' resources, such as community space? If this is the case, what might this mean for those living in less affluent areas that are – perhaps erroneously – considered to already have low 'social capital': some authors, such as Gleeson and Bloemard (2010) and Williams (2011) argue that several studies draw on more formal aspects of the voluntary sector and more formally-recognised voluntary activity to operationalise social capital, consequently leading to incomplete evidence and subsequently offering potentially misleading conclusions on the distribution of social capital (for examples of other work on the geographical distribution of below-radar groups see Mohan et al. 2010 and Mohan et al. 2011).

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[1] It is worth noting here that the statistical term 'hidden' is a technical reference for those who/that do not appear on population-lists; it is not used to suggest these types are actively hiding from others.
[2] This is based on feedback from several presentations as well as discussion arising from TSRC's BtR reference group in 2009 and 2010, which has highlighted controversial debates on the purpose, feasibility and expense of mapping below-radar groups and activities – with views expressed at extreme ends of the spectrum for their (potential) usefulness.

3.2. What was done and how?

3.2.1. What (definition)

Recognising that our definition needs to be flexible and inclusive to capture the (potential) breadth of groups and activities that may be considered part of the below-radar third sector, a definition with minimal conceptual boundaries was developed for the Street-Level search; that is, more than two people coming together on a regular bases to do activities in and around (public and third-sector) space for not-for-profit purpose. Even with this, however, there are conceptual biases that are further exacerbated by place-based fieldwork (see section 3.2.4) in which some types of below-radar groups are still likely to be excluded. For instance, groups that do not have a fixed base, such as mobile groups and virtual networks, and those that operate from private dwellings, public houses and cafes – types that are documented elsewhere in others' work (see for example Craig et al. 2010). Furthermore, this does not include those 'very active citizens' who in and of themselves are recognised by some authors as considerable resources to their local communities – referred to in some literature as 'great keepers together' (Seabrook 1984). Even with these limits, however, the study reveals some below-radar groups that do not have fixed abodes as well as key individuals that bring in resources to support below-radar groups who are referred to in this paper as 'community bricoleurs' (see Sections 4 and 6).

#### 3.2.2. Where… selecting each of the piloted areas

Anticipating the labour-intensiveness of 'street-level' searches, tight geographical boundaries were put in place to manage the feasibility of this project. Two small discrete geographical areas in largely urban settings were selected for study: one in the West Midlands, which is hereon referred to as 'High Street' and the other in the North West of England, hereon referred to as 'Mill Town'. Pen portraits for each area can be found on pages 7 and 8.

Whilst each of these (two) neighbourhoods constitute relatively large urban areas (one more than the other), their wider areas offer contrasting ethnic demographics: High Street is located in a local authority that comprises a high BME population and Mill Town a White British population. These areas were selected for their distinctive features, offering the potential for wider insights into the breadth of groups operating in what seemingly constitute different types of urban areas. In addition, one of these two areas was covered by the NSTSO piloted study from the then Office for the Third Sector (Ipsos MORI 2010) – offering the potential to do (future) comparative analyses.

As the SLMP is as much to do with piloting approaches for finding below-radar groups as it is to do with the findings themselves, there are variants on the way in which each route was constructed and the efforts put into different search tools to find activities.

In the case of 'High Street' the route was made up of a high street (hence the name) and five neighbouring (primarily residential) roads – the route was constructed using researchers' existing knowledge (and suspicions) of organisational activities that might be located in this area. Using what we refer to as an 'indiscriminate-sector-search', multiple searches were used to find groups that included walking-the-streets and dropping into as many buildings, whatever their purpose, to talk to people who could help us. Visits to buildings included: faith buildings, international telephone shops, a library, pharmacy and registered charity.

Figure 1: High Street
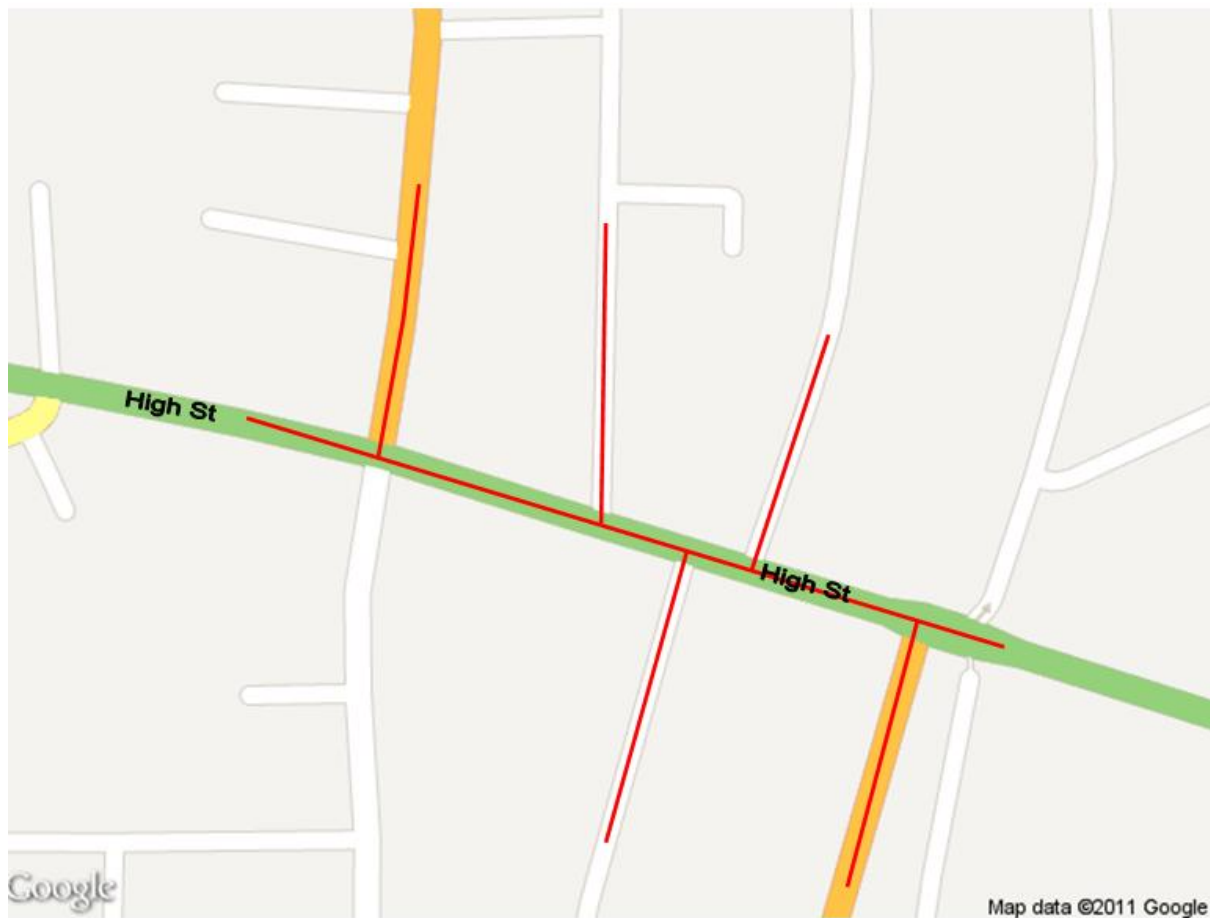
Pen portrait 1: High Street

High Street is a residential area consisting of six streets; one of which includes a high street with restaurants and supermarkets selling a diverse range of foods, a mix of faith-based buildings and public buildings, including a job centre and library. Within a few miles of a busy city centre, High Street is situated in a highly populated ward with more than 25,000 residents. The ward has a high BME population (82%) compared with the city's average (30%). It has a long history of migrant settlement with an established Asian and Black-Caribbean community, and a recent influx of migrant and asylum seekers that have not been captured in the 2001 census. At the time of the fieldwork in 2009-2010 the economically active constituted 54% of the population at ward level, which was lower than the city's average of 61%.

Reflecting on experiences from the High Street pilot, a different approach was used to construct the route in Mill Town to allow more detailed investigative time. This involved developing contacts and meeting with staff from a regional infrastructure agency, local infrastructure agency and local authority neighbourhood liaison officers. Using information from these meetings, an area was selected with contrasting features in terms of the ethnic demographic – that is predominantly 'White' English – though there was anecdotal evidence of a growing refugee, asylum and migrant population settling in the area. The route was then constructed by identifying five focal points (of voluntary and community organisations) based on a walking-interview with the Chief Executive a local infrastructure agency. This was followed up with street-searches and included, where possible, talking to people working in and around the five focal points of (shared) 'space'.

Figure 2: Mill Town
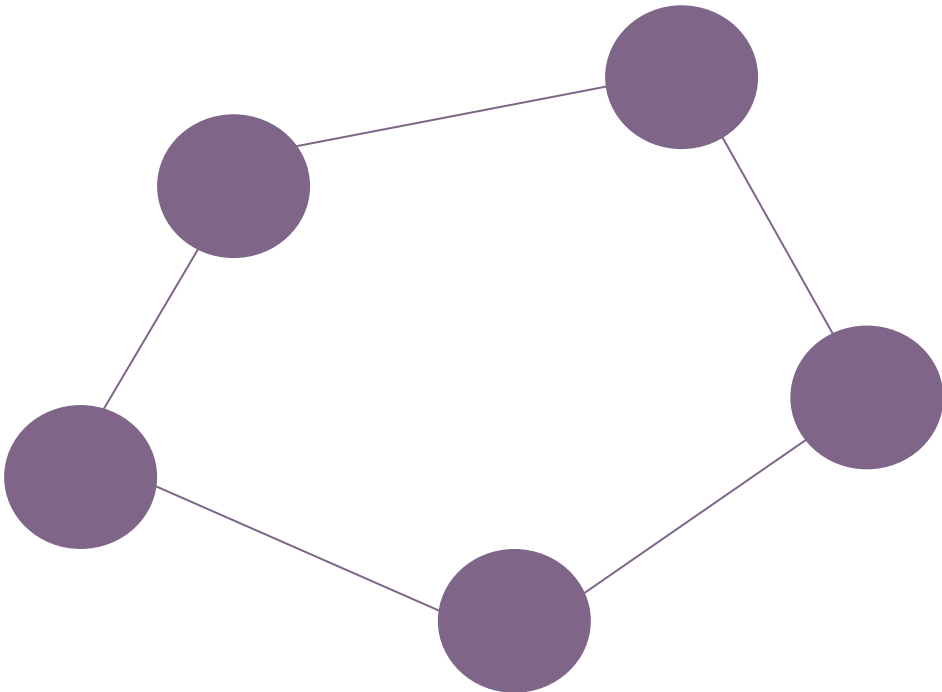
Pen portrait 2: Mill Town

Mill Town is a residential area situated within a mile of their nearby town shopping centre. The wider conurbation consists of town and country in the North West of England. In contrast with High Street, the local authority's population is predominantly white (over 90%) and the largest ethnic population is South Asian (4%). At the time of fieldwork, 80% of the population were economically-active – higher than the North West's average working population.

Overall this is largely a white affluent area with some pockets of deprivation; Mill Town is one of them. Furthermore, like High Street, Mill Town has experienced an influx of migrant, refugee and asylum seekers that are not captured in the 2001 census figures.

3.2.3. How we micro-mapped…

Fieldwork was carried out part-time over twelve months by a researcher with assistance from a community researcher and volunteers (Summer 2009- Spring 2010). In the first piloted area, a community researcher was employed to add local and cultural knowledge to what is referred to as a 'super-diverse' area for the (potential) to widen our access to community activities in the area.

Volunteers also worked on an ad-hoc basis and assisted with finding groups and more information on them by doing some 'street-level' mapping and on-line searches. As already indicated multiple search tools were used to find local community activities. These were not carried out in any particular sequence and, often, multiple searches were used at any given time. This flexibility offered the advantage to maximize opportune moments: to gather information as-and-when individuals were available to offer information. These include:

- solo-walks – this involved walking through streets looking at noticeboards and adverts in, for example, shop windows, outside buildings and elsewhere;

- visiting buildings and open spaces that people might gather in – for example, community centres, faith-based buildings, Jobcentreplus, leisure centres and libraries. In High Street visits were also made to shops on the high street (attempts to speak with people in shops was, however, dropped for the second pilot as this proved too time-consuming). Visits involved scouring through noticeboards, picking up leaflets and adverts on groups and in one case we obtained a copy of a video production on one of the below-radar groups. Where possible, we spoke with people who might know of groups meeting in these places and elsewhere. In two cases, both of which were community centres, researchers were given access to diaries and appointment calendars to collect information on groups who used rooms to meet at the centre, at a nominal, if any, charge;

- conversations, emails and interviews with people who were identified as having knowledge about activities going on in buildings and the local area. As noted earlier, in one case this included a 'walking interview' with the Chief Executive Officer from a local infrastructure agency – an organisation that recently invested in updating and populating a database of third sector groups that was inherited from a now defunct agency.

During fieldwork where it was possible to speak directly with people who reported some form of connection with groups – for example, those that participated in group activities and those who coordinated the provision and preparation of space – researchers used a form to collect basic information on other leads and potential below-radar groups (see Appendix 1 for a copy of this form).

Even using a simple four-page form in any systematic way, however, presented challenges – often this was because whilst these individuals reported knowing of groups, they did not tend to have complete information or even a full name for the person(s) leading the groups and activities.

3.2.4. Limitations

Inevitably this was a limited and labour-intensive task covering very small geographical areas and did not lend itself well to, for example, groups on the move, such as the 'Reclaim the streets' cycling campaigns, and virtual networks. Furthermore, fieldwork was set in largely deprived urban locations and the local activities found in these areas may not reflect different types of area, such as rural and more affluent areas. It does not, therefore, provide a representative and comprehensive picture, or at least not one that could be scaled-up to be representative of other areas, still less the sector as a whole. Nevertheless, it does provide a fascinating insight into the depth, breadth and variety of organisational activity taking place within these areas and suggests that if we are able to look beneath the radar in other places too, we might find out much about the third sector and its place in our social lives that cannot be captured in official measures and top-down descriptions.

4. What does it look like beneath the official radar?

4.1.   The count so far… 58 varieties of little Big Society

One of the most important findings from our 'street-level' mapping study is the scale and range of organisational activity that is going on beneath the radar. From the masses of information collated in just two small locations that amount to 11 streets of England, we found at least 58 varieties of self-organised activities that do not appear on regulatory lists.

We arrived at this figure through a process of elimination from information on over 215 entities; by excluding, for example, groups that did not operate within the 'street-walking' routes; projects and activities provided by registered charities and other-sector organisations, such as businesses and public libraries, and activities organised by individuals primarily to generate their own income, such as Judo and language classes (see Appendix 2). Moreover we suspect that this figure (of 58) is a conservative estimate of below-radar groups and activities in these two locations: with more time and more resources to follow-up incomplete leads it is highly likely we would have found more.

4.2.   What do they look like… the niche, the specific, and the very local?

These 58 below-radar groups cover a diverse range of services and activities, some of which are for those who share a particular topic of interest and others for a 'target community', including: those from a particular ethnic background, faith, country of origin, the elderly, youth and disabled people and combinations of these, such as a particular ethnic- and age-group. Using available data from these groups, six 'types' of below-radar were identified. In alphabetical order, these are: 'arts and music', 'multicultural and multiple faith- and ethnic-identities and activities'; 'niche and specialist interest'; 'self-help/mutual-support', 'single-identity cultural, faith and ethnic activities' and 'social club-based activities'. Whilst these types are somewhat arbitrary and simplistic, they have been devised primarily

for descriptive and analytical purposes rather than to suggest that groups are one-dimensional. Indeed, in reality there is substantial overlap between several of them.

Arts and music: these are groups in which art and music appear to be the central focus of activity. Four groups are categorised under this type: a jazz group for those who are 'into all kinds of jazz'; a writer group and an art group. A fourth group affiliated to a wider charity, is a folk-dancing group that focuses on the performance dance that is traditional associated with a particular ethnic group and could, arguably, be considered under the type 'single-identity'.

Multicultural and multiple faith- and ethnic-identities and activities: this type can be described as those groups that focus on activities targeted for people who are from several (usually more than two) faiths, ethnicities and countries. Seven groups are categorised into this type – several of the groups were for recent UK arrivals, though there were some for people from a mix of established ethnic communities as well as recent arrivals. Examples include: a 'multinational football team' initially set up as part of a cohesion project by a registered charity to bring together young isolated (refugee) men, a young men's pool club for (isolated) refugee and asylum seekers and a 'patchwork quilt group' for refugee and asylum-seeker women. The pen portrait below provides a more detailed picture of a group that falls into this category; and highlights the overlapping boundary between different 'types', in this case with 'self-support'.

Pen portrait 3: support group for refugees and asylum seekers'

Meeting place: community centre in Mill Town

This group was set up with the help of a trustee from a community centre as a result of increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers dropping in looking for help with various (and sometimes very immediate) needs. The users are refugees and asylum seekers from diverse backgrounds and countries.

The group holds a twice-weekly drop-in session, is run by volunteers, including those who have and are still using the drop-in services, and does not have any paid staff. As well as drawing on their own knowledge, users draw on the expertise, skills and knowledge of trustees and paid and unpaid staff working at the community centre.

The group has been involved in various art projects, including a film production about themselves. There have been several spin-offs from this group, including a sewing group where women from different countries meet and talk to each other. This and other spin-offs are reported to be an opportunity to help individuals express some of their traumatic experiences as well as an opportunity to offer support to each other.

'Niche'/specialist interests: these include groups of people who come together to share a very specific, niche interest. There are three groups: a dowser group, a group who are interested in (old-style) filmmaking and 'film-watching'; and a group interested in transmitters and radios.

Self-help/mutual support: this includes groups of people who support each other, usually through identified shared-experiences and mutual-monetary support. Eight groups are classified in this type and include: a group for 'single-mums', a seasonal 'lone-parent' group who meet weekly over the summer at a church hall (see pen portrait 4), parents whose children have died through gun-crime, women's aid support (not part of the national Women's Aid group) and a support group for the hard-of-hearing. Three groups were identified as supporting each other primarily for mutual-monetary purposes, all of which were reported to stem back to practices and needs of migrant Pakistani communities settling in the local area during the 1950s. Two of these three groups are 'Death Committees' and the third a 'friend-saving-club'. There are substantial overlaps between these and other groups in the 'multicultural and multiple faith- and ethnic-identities and activities' and 'single-identity cultural, faith and ethnic activities' types.

Pen portrait 4: a seasonal group - 'the summer lone parent group', High Street
Meeting place: church

This group was identified from a postcard advert on a notice board in a leisure centre located in a park. The advert was pitched at 'lone parents', offering them a chance to meet with others to reduce the feeling of isolation and for their children to learn through play. The advertised venue was a local church hall, with weekly meetings over a six-week period (during school summer holidays). There was also a request for a weekly £1 contribution to cover the cost of tea and biscuits.

Single-identity cultural, faith and ethnic activities: this includes groups that specify support for people from a particular ethnic or faith group or country of origin (for those from established communities or recent arrivals in to the UK). Fifteen groups were identified as falling into this type, 11 in High Street and four in Mill Town. They cover a wide range of activities and interests for a diverse range of users from different countries and ethnicities. Cumulatively, the 11 groups in High Street cover people from ten different countries, including: Angola, Lithuania, Russia and Sudan. Whilst several of these groups offer opportunities to learn English, offer classes for children to learn their parents' 'mother-tongue', many of them organise cultural and social activities, such as cooking lessons and sewing as opportunities to come together. Some include 'bridge-building activities' and others have target populations with multiple identities, such as young people from a particular faith, and women from a particular ethnic group.

Social club-based activities: this type includes what some might consider as 'hobby' groups. There are eight groups, some of which arguably crossover with other types. Interestingly, all bar one group were advertised for elderly people. They include: a Bridge Club, line-dancing, machine-knitting, sewing classes and 'senior sports', whilst others offered more general activities for the 'elderly'. The eighth group is a social club for young disabled people.

Other groups: there were four groups that did not sit well in any of these six types: a community farm for abused and animals (pen portrait 9), a local action group that looks after communal areas by, for example, planting flower beds (pen portrait 6) and a group of friends and family who put together savings on a regular bases to send money to orphans and widows from a nominated village in Pakistan.

A summary of the six below-radar types is outlined in Table 1. Note, however, that the four 'other' groups and a further nine groups are not included in the table as there was insufficient information to identify what type they might fall into.

Table 1: Types of below-radar groups and activities

Type	Brief description	Examples	High St. No.	Mill Town No.	Total
Art and music	Art and music appear to be the focal point	Jazz, arts, writing, folk-dance	1	3	4
Multicultural and multiple faith- and ethnic-identities and activities	Groups focusing on bringing together people from different countries, faith and ethnicities; mainly for recent arrivals to the UK but there are groups for more established settlers and a mix of these.	Football group and pool group for isolated young men recently arriving into the UK user-come-volunteer self-support on various issues: housing, employment, etc.	2	5	7
Niche and specialist interest	People who come together to share a very specific, niche interest.	Dowser group Radio transmissions	0	3	3
Self-help/mutual-support	Groups that support each other because of shared experiences or for monetary support.	Death committees; Friend-saving-club; Lone-parent meeting club Women's aid group (not part of the national network); Deaf group Parents of children who have died from gun crime	3	5	8
Single-identity cultural, faith and ethnic activities	These groups focus on people who are from a particular ethnic or faith group, or country of origin and offer a diverse range of activities including: learning English, developing friendships and for spiritual well-being.	Befriending group: to establish friendships with Russian and British people; Learning English; Cultural and social activities to improve English and reduce isolation, including sewing and cooking together Volunteer-run language classes (parents' mother-tongue) Spiritual groups	11	4	15
Social Club-Based Activities	Social activities for groups; in this study these were mainly targeted towards the elderly, those in their 'third age'	Bridge club; Line-dancing;	0	8	8
			17	28	45*

4 'other'

*Insufficient information to determine the 'type' for nine below-radar groups

Even within such small localities, the vast diversity of below-radar groups is clearly evident – with variation between and within the six 'types'. By and large, many of them are embedded into their communities, operating within a specific socio-cultural context at very local area. Although not in their entirety, many of them are likely to reflect the interests and needs of those within their local area. Demonstrating this, groups in High Street tended to fall into the two types: 'multicultural identity' and 'single-cultural identity' and capture more than ten different ethnicities, faith and countries; reflecting an area that some refer to as 'super diverse'. In contrast, there seems to be more variation in Mill Town, including groups with niche interests, activities for the elderly, as well as multicultural- and single-cultural identity groups. This variation is likely to reflect the local community that comprises white British, established Pakistani and recent settlers from abroad and the variant approach to pilot the second area using voluntary and community spaces as focal points (see section 3.2.2).

4.3. Longevity

Differential amounts of information were gathered on each of the groups and from available findings, evidence shows a wide range between below-radar groups' years of operation. Some, for example, were set up as recently as 2008 (only a year from the commencement of fieldwork in 2009). In contrast, there were others that have been in operation for several decades, such as the earlier mentioned 'Death Committee' self-support group that was set up in the 1950s (see also pen portrait 7). In another case, a group has reported that they can trace their history as far back as the 1930s.

5. Very resourceful self-organised activity

5.1. Self-organised, but not islands

Self-organised activities need some form of resourcing if they are to exist– this might simply be people's time to come together to do something and share experiences, it may be a place to meet, such as someone's living room or a room hired from a library, community centre or faith-building. And, depending on what activities they do they may need to draw on others' help for particular skills, knowledge and financial support. These may vary at any given time and depending on what they do, how they do it and where they do it, there is likely to be a (variable) cost: whether this takes the form of human capital, acquisition of equipment, using shared-space, payment-in-kind and money.

In this study, evidence clearly shows that many of the groups are connected to and draw on others' resources for their activities and work (as noted earlier, more detailed work on the acquisition of knowledge, skills and expertise is being explored in TSRC's 'Family Trees' project). These resources include membership to specialist networks, such as the national writers' network, support from voluntary and environmental organisations, such as Groundwork and local infrastructure agencies, use of space in, for example, a church or voluntary organisation, as well as the time, knowledge and expertise of (paid and unpaid) staff who work in the buildings they meet in.

Expounding on this with detailed examples of self-organised activity, this section focuses on groups' ability to generate resources by *'tapping in'* to their own users and *'tapping out'* beyond their users to others elsewhere to obtain and blend resources for their work and activities. Findings show a further dimension on *'giving out';* highlighting that whilst many below-radar groups exist to support their own users, there are several cases in which very small local groups are *giving out* resources (money and time) to wider communities. All three of these dimensions to generating and distributing resources clearly demonstrate that below-radar groups in this study, at least, do not operate as islands.

5.2. 'Tapping in', 'tapping out' and 'giving out'.

In the case of *'tapping in'*, there are several groups that self-sustain their activities by charging a nominal amount to their users or ask them for donations to cover the cost of, for example, room-hire and food. Illustrating this is the case of a writing group that asks for a £3 weekly donation to cover the cost of room hire and the seasonal lone-parent group outlined in pen portrait 4 in which users are asked for a £1 weekly donation to cover the cost of tea and biscuits.

There are also cases in which members regularly contribute money to a shared pot to financially support each other; these tend to resemble mutual-saving and mutual-insurance schemes. As noted earlier, one of these examples includes the 'Death Committee':

Pen portrait 7: the Death Committee in Mill Town

Meeting place: no fixed abode though members frequent a centre for elderly Pakistani men

The Death Committee was set up in the 1950s for members of the Pakistani community: by making a regular contribution to a shared pot, this was initially set up to help cover the cost of sending a member's body back 'home'. Over time with less overseas burials, the cost now tends to cover funerals in the UK.

This was reported to be one of two that operate across the local authority and was identified from an interview with the centre manager of a voluntary organisation. The Committee does not have a fixed abode and, instead, those who run the scheme visit places where their members tend to meet to collect money, including a local centre for elderly Pakistani men and two local mosques.

In the case of groups '*tapping out'* to generate resources beyond their users, they did this in a variety of ways including innovative entrepreneurial activities such as making and selling jewellery, arts and craft. Some obtained small amounts of money from charitable trusts and other schemes set up for small groups. These tended to be for discrete projects and for the purchase of specified products. In addition, some groups received payment-in-kind that contributed towards sustaining activities. The two pen portraits 8 and 9, immediately below, are powerful illustrations of the multiple ways in which groups obtained resources from within (tapping in) and outside of their user group (tapping out).

Pen portrait 8: women's international group in High Street

Meeting Place: community resource centre in High Street

This group consists of women who meet regularly; some of them are from established ethnic communities and others are recent arrivals to the local area (and country). Users of these groups are from diverse backgrounds and different countries, including: Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Lithuania, Poland, Russia and India. Although this group receives some support from key (paid) staff in the building that they meet in, they operate as a volunteer-led group and do not have paid staff of their own.

The group initially came together as a result of women in different groups (that used the same building) talking 'over a cup of coffee' about the changes to eligibility of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes: in line with the Learning Skills Council, new means-tested criterion meant that several women were not eligible for subsidized places on the local college's ESOL classes:

'…it was just through meeting other women in the other organisations over a cup of coffee… we just thought it wasn't very fair, we didn't find it logical that the very people needing this provision couldn't tap into it because of financial issues. And it sort of developed on from there as a sort of coffee morning group where we invited women to come along and just talk and in that way they could improve their English because they were from different countries, different backgrounds. Just by talking they could make friends, they could improve their English language skills… and it developed from there.'

Although the group initially met to learn English over coffee, users identified other issues faced by women in the local community; and, with the assistance from staff in their host organisation they managed to obtain external resources to run ad-hoc events. These include events on: 'confidence-building for women', the menopause and health awareness on cancer(s). Some of these events have been held at a nearby school and local fire station. More recently, the group's interest has broadened to include learning about their 'rights' and having their 'say' on 'services in their area'.

With their expanding interests, the group is now looking for ways to obtain additional amounts of money to achieve their vision of having a 'permanent post for a development worker who can take up the day-to-day running of this organisation'. In the meantime, they raise money through the selling of bric-a-brac and making and selling, for example, jewellery.

"It was one way of overcoming that barrier (financial support) until we get some funding for a paid member… and also I think those kind of things draw women in, jewellery, make-up, books… are raising money to support their activities…"

Recently this group has obtained a small pot of money from a funding body that supports local grassroots organisations to help with some of their activities, and they continue to draw on the knowledge and skills from staff in the building that they meet in.

Pen portrait 9: community farm for abandoned and abused animals, farmland in Mill Town

Inconspicuously accessed through a footpath and located behind industrial buildings is a community farm for abused and abandoned animals. The farm has several animals, including 100 battery hens, a goat, pigs and rabbits. At the time of fieldwork the farm was a constituted group, but not a registered charity or a Community Interest Company.

The farm is run informally by a volunteer called Paul, along with support from his wife – paperwork has been known to be eaten by one of their parrots.

Paul is a retired farmer in his 70s. Despite the farm's work spanning over the North West region, there are no paid staff to sustain the work on the farm. Maintaining the farm is a mammoth task and involves finding the resources to transport animals, maintain the land, feed and clean out the animals' homes and finding money to cover the vet fees (one of the largest financial outgoings). Success in obtaining resources to sustain the farm is largely to do with the determination and commitment of Paul, which is fittingly captured in the quotation below:

"Once I [Paul] get into something I don't give a damn: I just go and go. I'll get it because Robert the Bruce says 'try, try and try again'. You have to don't you? … They can say yes or no, but I won't take no for an answer. I have to keep going."

Paul is an incredibly resourceful person who 'taps in' and 'taps out' in multiple ways to sustain the farm. Beyond membership to a national City Farm network, he has established links with local and national organisations that support his work by providing time, money and other services. To illustrate, he has an agreement with DEFRA for the transportation of some of the animals; a veterinarian who does occasional pro-bono work; and he has obtained money from local funding bodies to purchase specified equipment. In addition, he has help from volunteers and participants from work experience schemes, including schools, youth offending rehabilitation programmes and work programmes that help to, for example, *'clean out, muck out and feed the rabbits'.* On top of this, Paul creates ways to raise money by, for example, doing weekend car-boot sales, selling free-range eggs and buying and selling bedding plants.

In addition to 'tapping in' and 'tapping out' to sustain themselves, there is evidence to show that several of these small local groups generate resources and distribute them to (their) wider communities – '*giving out'* – for different reasons and in a variety of ways. Illustrating this is a case whereby friends and family put together savings on a regular bases to send to orphans and widows of a nominated village in Pakistan; at the time of fieldwork, another group was setting up a volunteer befriending service for isolated people. In another case, responding to a community centre's appeal to raise money for a replacement boiler and necessary building work for this, several groups have got involved in and organised events to raise money. For example, women from one of the 'multicultural identity' groups ran a day-event offering 'threading services' at £3 per treatment, others cooked and sold meals, and one group put a temporary surcharge on their weekly membership fee. At the time of fieldwork, cumulatively, these groups have raised over £1,000 to contribute towards a project that is estimated to cost in excess of £40,000.

Other illustrations of groups using and mobilising resources for (their) wider communities include the international women's group that organise health awareness events for women in the local area (described in pen portrait 8) and Paul from the Community Farm who attends several local events, sometimes with animals:

> We take the animals out to garden parties and schools and we're out with [local organisation] on 10th July down at (inaudible 0:21:29) and we work with [national animal charity] … We take animals and it's amazing how many people have never touched a live animal, a farm animal and things like that. There's no money in it for us. It's the satisfaction.

Paul's engagement with local and government programmes to sustain the farm's work (described in pen portrait 9) can also be considered as offering services to participants of these schemes and, arguably, offer benefits to the wider community.

6. 'Bricoleurs', 'Community Bricoleurs' and 'Shared-Space'

6.1. Bricoleurs and community bricoleurs

In many respects, self-organised activities in this study can be seen as collections of individual 'bricoleurs'. This is a term commonly used in the field of social entrepreneurial literature that is adapted from the work of Lévi-Strauss (1967) to refer to individuals who are able to draw on and acquire a mix of resources to get on with what they are doing; making ends meet by blending whatever they can for their own purpose(s) (see for example, Di Dominico et al. 2010). Examples include the mutual-type groups set within the historical socio-cultural context of what was once the new economic migrants in the 'fifties in Mill Town; groups set up at a time in need of (financial) support and have continued.

More recent and powerful illustrations of 'bricoleur' activity can be found in the two cases outlined earlier in pen portraits 8 and 9 on the community farm and the women's group. As earlier described, with his drive and commitment Paul successfully tapped into local and national networks to obtain money, time and equipment to sustain the farm for abused and abandoned animals. Like him, users from the women's group pulled together multiple resources for their activities, including making and selling art, craft and jewellery. In contrast, however, this group's location in a building offering communal space had the additional advantage of (potential) frequent access to (paid and unpaid) staff and, in particular, access to a phenomena that we refer to as 'Community Bricoleurs'.

Albeit reflecting the methodological leaning towards identifying below-radar groups in shared-space, there is a story beyond and entwined with bricoleurs to do with the (potential) resources and opportunities arising from the use of shared-space: a notable one being the aforementioned 'Community Bricoleurs' who operate in shared-space. Distinct from individual 'bricoleurs' who, in this study, obtain and blend a mix of resources to support and sustain their *own* group, 'Community Bricoleurs' operate beyond the boundaries of any one group and instead pull-together resources for *several* groups and individuals. These individuals might be considered as working towards supporting a cause rather than any one particular group. A more accurate description of this type could be

'community-building bricoleurs'; and, conceptually these individuals can be 'bricoleurs' and 'community-building bricoleurs'.

Below are two illustrations that highlight the commitment and networks of socially-driven community-building bricoleurs who operate in shared-spaces – one from each of the piloted areas. The first is a paid staff and the second is a volunteer and trustee.

Pen portrait 11: Ben - Centre Manager for a community resource centre in High Street

Ben is a white male in his 70s. Prior to retirement at 65, he worked for the city council and in the housing sector. He was a member of a political party and was involved in various committees at local and national level, including Cabinet Office level.

With a long history working on housing issues, since his retirement his increasingly continued interest on the 'plight of refugees' and lack of infrastructural support available to them (which, he explains, was before the time of organisations such as the National Asylum Support Services) led him to work towards creating a physical base for community groups. During an interview in which he recounted a conversation with a man with the "two bulging briefcases" (the man's mobile office), Ben talked about the man's stressful situation in which refugees and asylum seekers who were often in immediate and very desperate need would frequently turn up at his family-home at any hour of the day in search of help and information.

Ben reported that this story along with his own growing concern for refugees and asylum seekers, led him to the idea of creating a base for people like the man with the 'bulging briefcases' to use as their office space: "there were lots like him in their respective communities, [they] could actually use a base to work from, and develop their services…"

After making a couple of phone calls and visiting a private landlord whose tenant was looking to break-ties with a lease, Ben was offered the lease at an affordable price if he could find ways to cover the cost. Within a short period of time, he managed to pull together money from multiple sources, including: a housing organisation, the city council and a regeneration community cohesion funding pot. The building was re-wired and brought up to standard for multiple use, computers were bought and he managed to obtain used-furniture to furnish the building:

"[we] begged and borrowed desks and chairs… nothing matches in here but it's all serviceable"

After three years of financial support from a housing association, the final third year being an extension to an initial two-year agreement, this organisation was registered as a charity and remains a home to several groups and organisations. Some of these are constituted and others are not, some are registered charities and some are at varying process of registering as charities and others not. Rather modestly, Ben talks about success in plural terms, using references such as 'we' and 'us'. Whilst this is a case in which the sum is greater than all its parts, with a centre that can now offer for example access to 25 different languages, provide multiple activities and projects, such as art cohesion projects in schools with children from diverse backgrounds, Ben was pivotal in the centre's ability to become a self-sustaining organisation.

> **Pen portrait 12: Brenda - trustee of a community centre that offers space to community groups and offers other services in Mill Town**
>
> Brenda is one of the trustees for a centre that offers services to the local (geographic) community, including the use of space to local voluntary and community groups.
>
> Brenda spends much of her time at the centre offering (voluntary) support to individuals and community groups; in particular, those who are refugee and asylum seekers. During my first visit to the centre, she was helping an individual who dropped in to the centre looking for (emergency) assistance to complete some forms.
>
> Like Ben, Brenda has a wide network that spans sectors and has been adeptly described as a woman with 'many fingers in many pies'. She has obtained several resources from multiple sources to support groups using the communal space at the centre – at the time of fieldwork, for example, she managed to tap into networks at the nearby Further Education college to obtain small amounts of money to run ESOL classes for refugee and asylum seekers attending the community centre.
>
> As well as pulling in resources for groups, she has encouraged and supported the set up of semi-self-supporting groups, one of which includes the 'user-come-volunteer-user' refugee group outlined in pen portrait 3. She has also assisted with smaller off-shoot groups from this, including: a group of women refugees who get together to sew and talk, and a weekly evening social club for young isolated refugee men.

6.2. Shared space

As noted earlier, several of the groups in this study operate with small overheads and need little, if any, finance to sustain their activities. In this sense then, money is not (directly, at least) central for them to sustain themselves. Nevertheless, whether or not aware of this – many of these groups were supported in a variety of ways (directly and indirectly) by paid and unpaid staff working in the buildings that they use. At the most basic level, for example, staff prepared space for their use by putting away and setting up furniture; some received assistance with holding meetings and there were several examples in which staff helped groups put together applications for small pots of money. More fundamentally, there were staff who worked behind the scenes to ensure that the shared-space is a financially viable resource to the community by bringing in money to sustain their own organisation and, thereby, the building in which these groups meet.

Other opportunities arising from the use of shared-space include: the cross-over between different groups and cross-fertilisation that resulted in the creation of new groups. For example, in the case of the community centre that needs a replacement boiler, fundraising activities such as a jumble-sale stall located in the main communal hall led to the cross-over between groups. In another case outlined in pen portrait 8, women from different groups 'chatting over coffee' led to the identification of shared concerns on the (lack of) access to ESOL classes; subsequently leading to the formation of a self-support group that now offers diverse activities on, for example, health awareness.

The opportunities arising from the use of shared-space is not without tension, there is some evidence to suggest perceived differential access to community-bricoleurs, for instance, and the need to manage the way space is used to ensure that some groups are not seen as dominating communal spaces designed for all (their) users. Understanding the price and (social) value of these shared-spaces go beyond the remit of this paper, though more detailed analyses is planned for future TSRC's papers.

7. Big societies or little societies?

In concluding our search for what lies beneath the third-sector radar, perhaps the most certain feature shared amongst all 58 varieties of self-organised activity found in this study is that, at the time of fieldwork at least, none of these were captured in official records; the regulatory-radar. And, subsequently, are highly unlikely to be included in wider trend analyses that draw on administrative records. Beyond this, however, the study reveals a diverse range of organised activity in the two small geographical areas examined; and has contributed towards developing six typologies to show the wide range of activity that goes on beneath-the-regulatory-radar so to speak.

The groups' specificity of interest, which in many cases is embedded in their local communities, suggests a parochial element to below-radar groups and in this sense many of them are not suited to the (or even desire) delivery of public services for all. What findings do show, however, is that there is a lot going on below the radar and local community level. More so, if this is to be applied to the new UK government's socio-political interest in Big Society's policy strand on 'social action' to encourage people to get together and do things for themselves, then arguably these below-radar groups can be considered as already doing the 'Big Society' – or, even more so, could be considered as an amalgamation of little Big Societies.

Furthermore, data gathered using the innovative street-level methodology reveals several dimensions that are rarely identified or explored in research on the sector that relies on more established sources. Revealing, for example, that below-radar groups and activities are able to generate resources by 'tapping in' and 'tapping out' as well as distributing them to the wider community and through this are able to respond to a range of local needs and priorities. What is more, whilst *bricoleurs* help to draw in and co-ordinate activity and organisation, shared spaces in which many activities take place are often an essential resource. *Community hubs* and *community bricoleurs* were at the centre of the organisational activity that we were able to identify and analyse through our street-level mapping in High Street and Mill Town. All of which demonstrate that these groups do not operate as islands. This could be an isolated co-incidence of dense and co-ordinated community activity; but that seems unlikely – and, if it is not, then some important research and policy implications flow from this.

Our piloted street-level mapping project did involve intensive research and would be potentially expensive for TSRC to roll out at a wider geographical level. This work, however, is closely linked to local policy development and could be adapted and implemented by community researchers in any local area who want to look beneath the radar. Depending on demand, we are looking into the possibility to develop guidance and protocols for such replication that could be the bases for micro-mapping of the sector. In addition, as noted earlier TSRC's BtR work stream is carrying out work that will provide more detailed analyses on the different ways in which knowledge and resources are generated in below-radar groups amongst other areas of enquiry.

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Case number: *Version Three*

Micro-mapping exercise
Below-the-Radar work stream, Third Sector Research Centre, University of Birmingham
Activity, Group, Organisation form
Project leader: Andri Soteri-Proctor a.soteriproctor@bham.ac.uk

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Section A. For the researcher: Your initials:

1. Does this activity, group or organisation nest in the leg-work search area?:

2. How did you find this organisation?

3. Has this form been completed by speaking directly with someone from the activity, group or Organisation? Who (please write in their name)

4. If no, please write in how you have collected the information?

Section B. Activity, Group, Organisation contact details

Name of activity, group or organisation

If no name, please provide a basic description of what the activity, group, does

Address (inc. full post code if possible)
(if the address they use is not there official address, please mention this in section 3 and insert c/o before the address)

Contact person for the activity, group and organisation:

Telephone: **Email:**

Section C. About the activity, group or organisation
Researcher: please summarise the work of the activity, group and organisation
(You might, for example, want to include some information about the type of work they do and why, how long they have been around, where they meet (if they use other group's space etc).

Section D. Other activities and groups
Are you involved in other activities, groups and organisations? Please tell us more about each of these, how we could contact them and who we could speak to?

1.

2.

3.

4.

Section E. Other activities and groups continued
Do you know about activities, small groups and organisations in [area] that we could approach for our research?
Researcher: please write in the name of the activity, group or organisation and as much contact details as possible. If they do not have the correct details, ask if we can follow this up with them by email or telephone?

Section F. Thanks and follow-up questions for the researcher.
Researcher – please thank the person for their time and let them know this work will be useful for understanding what is out-there and that this information will be used to help contribute towards understanding the needs of such activities and groups.

Researcher – when finished and on your own, please double check the form and complete the questions below about whether we need to follow up the activity, group or organisation on this form.

1. Do we need to follow up the activity, group or organisation for more complete information for this form? If yes, please write in what needs following up.

2. Are there any activities, groups and organisations listed in section D and section E that we need to follow up?

3. Are there other reasons why we should follow up the person, activity, group or organisation in this form – if yes, please write in why?

Appendix 2: Process of elimination

Process of elimination, reason for exclusion:	Total
Information on (a project belonging to) registered charity, public sector organisations and private businesses	49
Do not fall in the leg work area	77
Insufficient information	32
Classes such as Judo and karate	7
Total entities excluded	165

About the Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

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Below the Radar

This research theme explores the role, function, impact and experiences of small community groups or activists. These include those working at a local level or in communities of interest - such as women's groups or refugee and migrant groups. We are interested in both formal organisations and more informal community activity. The research is informed by a reference group which brings together practitioners from national community networks, policy makers and researchers, as well as others who bring particular perspectives on, for example, rural, gender or black and minority ethnic issues.

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