

## **Civil society strategy: A policy review**

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## Introduction

Periodically policy-makers set out a broad vision for the development of voluntary action or wider civil society, and within this outline the planned role for and limits of government action. These strategic or field-shaping interventions can involve justifications for prioritising resources or policy attention on one thing rather than another, may simply list existing activities, or seek to frame debates in particular ways, signalling new directions. As such they are often matters of significant academic concern. Thus, for example, in April 1990 the UK Conservative government published the *Efficiency Scrutiny of Government Funding of the Voluntary Sector*, in July 2007 the Labour government published the outcome of its Third Sector Review, and in October 2010 the Coalition government published *Building a Stronger Civil Society: A strategy for voluntary and community groups, charities and social enterprises*, as part of the policy agenda to encourage a 'Big Society'. Each of these in different ways can be held to stand for, or represent, the assumptions and approaches of a particular time, government and field.

The minority UK Conservative government elected in June 2017 announced the intention to publish its own strategy for civil society in November 2017 (Crouch, 2017). After a period of consultation between February and May 2018, the strategy was eventually published on 9<sup>th</sup> August 2018 (HM Government, 2018), setting out 'how government will work with and support civil society in the years to come, so that together we can build a country that works for everyone' (HM Government, 2018: 12). Policy responsibility for civil society in the UK is devolved in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, so the civil society strategy covers England only.

In this policy review we outline the key features of the strategy, place them in a wider context, and hold some core themes up to critical scrutiny. Rather than attempt to examine the strategy exhaustively, we pick out four of the most prominent features of the strategy for further attention. Following a brief reflection on the strategy as a whole, then, we discuss the emphasis on 'social value'; the relationship between the Government and civil society; commissioning public services;

and the discussion of young people and participation. Finally, we examine the language of the strategy, particularly the definition of a 'social sector', arguing that there are risks in dismissing the strategy as lacking substance or ignoring its narrative positioning of voluntary action and wider civil society, given the implicated changes to institutional arrangements.

### **The Civil Society Strategy**

The strategy is formed around a definition of civil society as a source of social value:

...individuals and organisations when they act with the *primary purpose of creating social value*, independent of state control. By social value we mean *enriched lives and a fairer society for all*. (p.12, emphasis added)

In this vein it introduces a conceptual model of civil society based on 'five foundations' of social value, which provide communities with sufficient forms of capital in order to 'thrive'. The foundations - individuals, places, the social sector (which includes both voluntary organisations and social enterprises), the private sector, and the public sector - each receive their own chapter, alongside three explicit proposals regarding social value. Firstly, the strategy involves a commitment to develop effective indicators to measure the five foundations of social value, alongside improving the evidence base about what makes some communities more capable of 'thriving' than others. Second, it pledges a greater role for social investment as a mechanism for growing social value, building on the policy direction of successive Governments since 2004 (Wells, 2013). Finally, it outlines a role for government as a steward of public service markets in order that they achieve greater social value. This means improving procurement and commissioning processes so that they are more collaborative and focussed on outcomes which, the strategy states, can be achieved through an expansion of outcome-based commissioning and payment-by-results contracts, including social impact bonds (SIBs). This is accompanied by a commitment to strengthen the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 and increase social value commissioning across government, including an

extension of the Act to 'goods' and 'works' as well as services, to grants as well as contracts, and to planning and community asset transfer. There is also a pledge to 'account for' social value in new procurements, rather than just 'consider it'.

On a wider and more fundamental basis, the strategy's explicit aim is to set out 'how the government will work to support and to strengthen civil society, without compromising its independence' (p.18). The language however, is often non-committal. There are promises to 'work with' civil society (p.77) in various unspecified ways, to 'explore how to encourage' a more giving society (p.74), and to 'work with partners to explore' the benefits of digital (p.15). Although quite long, at 122 pages, 15 good practice case studies account for a great deal of this. The links between these and the Government's proposed actions are rarely spelt out. Perhaps some vagueness should not be surprising, given the small budget available to the Office for Civil Society, and ongoing austerity limiting the potential for investment.

The strategy states that the social sector is at the core of civil society but in marked contrast to policy publications by previous governments (HM Treasury, 2002, 2005) it receives only one specific chapter, and volunteering also takes a back seat, celebrated but provided with little new policy (Delaney, 2018; Jackson, 2018). The 'social sector' is acknowledged as having 'experienced major turbulence in the funding environment in recent years' (p.73), especially smaller organisations (see Crees et al. 2016), but the strategy makes few funding commitments. These announcements appear to be largely recycled (Chamberlain, 2018), and overall there is relatively little in terms of firm policy commitments. Most of the investment attached to the strategy will come from dormant accounts and foundations (approximately £330m [p.120]), which will be used to set up several new funds and provide new funding to existing institutions such as Big Society Capital and the Big Lottery Fund. Although welcome, this funding will not have a major impact on the finances of the sector as a whole, and both austerity and the uncertainty of leaving the European Union, arguably important drivers of this turbulence, are left almost entirely unaddressed. More positively, a clear statement

on the importance of charities' campaigning and lobbying (so long as not conducted directly using state funding), and a somewhat symbolic renewal of the Compact, will provide a measure of relief compared to some recent political upheaval (Wilson, 2018).

This policy review will now move to focus on four areas of the strategy in detail, followed by an examination of the language employed in the strategy's discursive framing of civil society.

### **Limitations of the focus on social value**

The way social value is embedded throughout the strategy represents a step-change in previous Government thinking. Previously, this has focussed on social value as an outcome of civil society activity which can be enhanced through government interventions. The framing of the strategy around five foundations of social value signifies a shift in focus toward the processes that create social value - namely the activities undertaken by people, communities and organisations (from all sectors) - in addition to the overall aim of creating social value itself. This will be broadly welcomed by civil society organisations, and is supported by recent research (AuthorC, 2018). However, a number of challenges also stand out.

The strategy states that there is a desire for better impact measurement across civil society, but it does not differentiate between macro and micro requirements. At a macro-level the strategy commits to exploring effective indicators to measure the *strength of* and *growth in* the five foundations of social value. At a micro level it recognises that civil society organisations often struggle to articulate their social value to commissioners. In practice these two issues need to be disentangled: it would be infeasible to try and attribute change in macro social value indicators to specific civil society actors or interventions. The strategy itself acknowledges the complex challenges facing society, and that these cannot be solved by Government alone, so require the combined efforts of the public, social and private sectors working together.

There is an assumption implicit throughout the strategy that social investment is an effective mechanism for increasing social value. This is a normative proposition that ignores the lack of any firm evidence that social investment produces more or better outcomes than traditional funding models (Wells, 2013; Fraser et al, 2018). Specific concerns have been raised about the efficacy of payment-by-results, including the possibilities for perverse incentives that may lead to sub-optimal behaviours such as gaming (Lowe and Wilson, 2017).

Finally, the plans to strengthen the Social Value Act do not differentiate between local and national action, and are limited to central government procurements. Yet the majority of public procurement from civil society organisations occurs at the local level. Thus, the proposals amount to a relatively weak commitment that fails to identify or engage with some of the most important levers or mechanisms through which change could be affected and it remains unclear what systems or processes will be put in place to ensure compliance.

### **The relationship between civil society and the state**

Although the public sector is placed as one of the conceptual foundations of social value, it is perhaps the only major grouping specifically excluded from civil society in the strategy. Even the private sector is included, providing it acts to provide social value *independently* of the state. In this respect, the strategy potentially reflects a renewed push towards a 'decoupling' of the voluntary sector from the state (AuthorA, 2013). The strategy describes government's role instead as the 'convenor' (p.18) of this broad coalition against societal problems. It suggests that it is not the state's role to safeguard peoples' wellbeing, but rather to bring together the capabilities and resources a community needs to do so itself.

The strategy wholeheartedly endorses responses to the consultation that argued the state should support, but not try to lead or organise the voluntary sector. Whilst this indicates a commitment to the much discussed 'independence' of the sector (Independence Panel, 2015), it is also a potential

denial of responsibility. The opening sections stress the commitment to transfer 'responsibility' (p.10) to communities, who will be 'empowered' (p.53) into 'stepping forward' (p.10). Provision of public services is the 'business of the community' (p.10), not government alone. Government programmes are explicitly ruled insufficient to tackle today's problems, perhaps ironically given ongoing austerity. Some may be uncomfortably reminded of the Big Society agenda under the 2010 Coalition Government, which struggled to overcome the suspicion that it was designed only to enable the withdrawal of the state from local communities (PASC, 2011). Such arguments are consistent with the idea of non-profit organisations, or 'communities' in this case, acting as a form of placebo to justify a lack of pro-active action by the state (Taylor, 2011).

Although the emphasis on thriving communities, decentralised decision making and the value of civil society may be welcome to some, it arguably fails to address severe inequalities between different areas and their unequal reliance upon state funded support (Clifford, 2012). Again, this must be seen in a context in which ongoing austerity and local government funding cuts hit the already most disadvantaged communities hardest (Beatty and Fothergill, 2014). The strategy does acknowledge that not all communities are starting from the same point, but asserts boldly that all communities will be able to participate regardless of levels of segregation and deprivation. It claims it will take steps to ensure this, but is silent on what those steps might be. Until the underlying issues of geographical inequality are addressed, which seems unlikely, communities and voluntary organisations will rightly view opportunities for greater responsibility with caution.

### **Rethinking public services commissioning**

Discussion of the public sector within the strategy focuses on 'ensuring collaborative commissioning'. The focus here is on how public services are designed, delivered, funded and assessed. The strategy outlines what it refers to as a 'framework for collaborative commissioning', where 'local stakeholders will be involved in an equal and meaningful way in commissioning and all the resources of a community, including but not confined to public funding, will be deployed to

tackle the community's challenges' (p.106). The policy aim is that commissioning involves ongoing collaboration across organisational silos and sectors, so that the whole range of organisations in civil society - social enterprises, charities, community businesses - is included.

The idea is prefaced by a remarkably open acknowledgement that the commissioning approach developed hitherto is deeply flawed. In privileging 'a transactional model of service delivery, with an often rigid focus on quantifiable costs, volumes, and timescales' it has neglected the importance of 'relationships, flexibility, and patience which the reality of life for many people and communities demands' (p.105). It is as if those involved in drafting the strategy have cast aside their New Public Management assumptions, with its emphasis on mirroring private sector priorities such as competition and efficiency, and embraced instead a version of New Public Governance, which emphasises the relational, networked and interdependent nature of public policy making (Osborne, 2010). The existing model, the strategy argues, tends to favour large companies which can bring greater resources to bear in preparing competitively priced bids, which restricts the diversity of providers. Echoing recent research, it notes that current commissioning 'fails to recognise the added value that small and local organisations can bring...' such as their local knowledge, flexibility and ability to attract other resources '...in short, the trust and social capital that they are stewards of' (pp.105-6; AuthorC, 2018).

Overall the strategy provides hints and nudges towards what collaborative commissioning might be, and thus seems to beg further work to animate the concept. It aims to bring all involved stakeholders together in a spirit of collaboration, it assumes citizens will be 'active shapers' rather than 'passive recipients' of services, and it talks of local people being trusted to co-design services and be involved in making commissioning decisions (p.106). The strategy says much less, however, on how collaborative commissioning will be ensured. The measures to make it happen involve central government withdrawing to a rather limited (and low-cost) facilitation role - supporting initiatives, sharing good practice, bringing people together. Thus social enterprises will be recognised



by central government as 'strategic suppliers', extending support for public service mutuals will be the subject of consultation, and the spread of 'citizen commissioners' - local people involved in making commissioning decisions on behalf of their communities - will be supported. Learning from the practice of local authorities pioneering the co-design and co-delivery of services with users will be shared and promoted. It involves quite a leap of faith to imagine that collaborative commissioning can move much beyond an aspiration on the basis of the above commitments.

Much public service commissioning takes place through local government, but there is little detail on how local authorities will be made, or otherwise encouraged, to adopt the new collaborative approach in the face of what the strategy describes euphemistically as 'current challenges' (p.107). Their lynchpin role is recognised, being 'uniquely placed to bring together all partners, including the voluntary community and social enterprise organisations, to take a wider view in addressing some of the key challenges faced by communities and to ensure the most vulnerable people are not left behind' (p.108). The strategy thus provides a distant echo of a New Labour world of Local Strategic Partnerships, Community Empowerment Networks and Community Strategies, without the resources or architecture, and with some key changes in language and positioning: communities will be seen as 'systems' of interconnected parts, public services are framed as a 'market' and the government will adopt a 'market stewardship' role (p.106).

### **Youth participation**

The practical steps outlined in the strategy to increase (youth) participation are thin. While volunteering entered the political mainstream in the late-twentieth century, with Labour and Conservative Prime Ministers backing various interventions in this newly significant area of government policy, the hyper-active burst of volunteering policy (Kendall, 2005) dissipates with this strategy. There are many critiques to make of recent attempts to (re)formulate citizens' relationship to the state - from the Third Way to communitarianism to the Big Society - but within the strategy's random hotchpotch of case studies, existing examples, and (small) funding streams, there is little

that could be said to add up to a clear philosophy for people's *action*. As previously noted, there is also no recognition that the government may have had any role in creating many of the current problems civil society needs to solve.

Particular attention in the strategy is paid to young people, with adults' civic participation barely apparent, barring reference to those serving to tackle loneliness or offering help during a disaster. Yet despite young people's centrality, the document appears confused and inconsistent about how best to engage the young in civil society. While evidence on the habitual nature of civic participation and social action, and that it is best formed in children around age 10 (p.31) is presented early on, neither existing nor future programmes for engaging 10-16 year olds receive adequate mention. The London Mayor's *Team London Young Ambassadors* programme is highlighted as enabling 'thousands of young people' (p.47) to improve their school and communities, but no wider roll-out or extra funding is discussed. 'In school' projects mentioned rest on a pilot of the dissemination of social action tools and workshops, and praising the successes of the citizenship curriculum, described by education researchers Burton and May (2015) as 'a second tier subject shoehorned into an overcrowded assessment-driven curriculum.' It is insubstantial for the government's strategy to celebrate a subject which research has shown schools frequently have no reason to take seriously (Weinberg and Flinders, 2018). So despite highlighting the importance of 'starting young' in civil society, the strategy offers little vision or adequate support for making this a reality. At a time of budgetary retrenchment for schools and the necessitated growth of (unequally spread) voluntary action within them (Body, Holman and Hogg, 2017), using schools as a vanguard for improving community life through curricular or extra-curricular action seems highly unlikely.

Instead, as is to be expected, it is the National Citizen Service (NCS) which dominates as the core example of youth provision. While the strategy outlines some decent recruitment numbers for NCS and independent evaluation that indicates a good link between participation and social integration (Laurence, 2018), NCS, with its £1.5bn budget from 2011-20, has been widely criticised for its

excessive and unjustified costs at a time when traditional youth services are disappearing due to cuts at local government level. Overall, discussion of the NCS suggests a lack of desire to think deeply about the realities of the programme and wider youth experiences and engagement, and that the government seems caught between seeing NCS as something to celebrate and as an intervention hard to justify.

There is no explicit plan outlined in this strategy for increasing the numbers of volunteers, increasing charitable giving, or to support young people with an early opportunity to get involved in their communities. The Conservatives' 2015 manifesto commitment to give all employees of large companies and public bodies three days volunteering leave (Smith, 2017) has been forgotten. However, given the stasis of volunteering numbers over the last twenty years, as revealed by yearly iterations of the current Community Life Survey (DDCMS, 2018a), one interpretation is that the government have realised pump-priming the 'moral economy' of giving and helping is tremendously hard, especially at a time of austerity, and it is better to limit ambitions, given the substantial funds already allocated to the NCS.

### **(Re)constructing the brave new world of civil society**

The publication of a new strategy provides an opportunity for close scrutiny of the language deployed in pursuit of particular policy goals. Important questions relate to how ideas are constructed, what kind of knowledge is promoted and how (Hastings, 1997). There are important language features within the strategy which warrant consideration. Here, we examine the way civil society is defined and constructed.

Definitional debates regarding 'the Sector' have been live amongst policy, practitioner and academic communities for some time. Whether questioning the origins of the term and the role of national committees in its emergence (6 and Leat, 1997), or critiquing the homogeneity the term may imply (Halfpenny and Reid, 2002), the notion of a grouping of organisations which sit outside both state

and private action remains an important discussion. New Labour adopted the notion of a distinct 'third' sector made up of voluntary, community and faith organisations, then latterly added social enterprise, co-operatives and mutuals. The subsequent Coalition administration collapsed this distinction in favour of aligning their treatment of third sector organisations with private corporations (AuthorB, 2016). In 2018, the Civil Society Strategy starts to further unpick the sense of a unified 'type' of organisation, and instead favours the term 'civil society', which denotes 'all individuals and organisations, when undertaking activities with the primary purpose of delivering social value, independent of state control' (p.18). In other words, we see a shift in emphasis away from the 'organisation' as the structure through which social value is enacted, and the subsequent loss of organisational type as the key locus of interest. Instead the strategy segments what we had previously understood in policy terms as the third sector into constituent parts, naming various organisational types from across previously distinct sectors that are leading the way in delivering social value.

The term 'sector' is not entirely absent from this new strategy, however. The way in which the label is used, certainly within the early sections of the strategy, provides a fascinating presentation of what could be termed the 'old world' order through references to 'the traditional social sector, including individual philanthropists, trusts and foundations...' (p.19). Using the adjective 'traditional' creates a tone of nostalgia, encouraging us to view charities and philanthropy as somewhat archaic, serving a bygone era. Labelling 'charities' as 'traditional' (p.18) further embeds the sense of an old world, which is then contrasted to the 'new world' of extensive, alternative ways in which social value is produced, not least through 'social enterprises, mutuals and mission-led businesses' (p.18). As readers, we are encouraged to start to see 'charities' as things of the past, while the strategy's contemporary understanding finds value in a broad plethora of places.

An important linguistic feature of this strategy is the inclusion of 'mission-led businesses' in the expanded, new world order. Although New Labour can be considered pro-business (AuthorB, 2016),

this Conservative administration strategy goes much further. Not only does it acknowledge the role that private business can play, it brings mission-led business centre stage of 'civil society'. We are thus encouraged to loosen our focus on traditional preoccupations and understand the role that the private sector, one of the five foundations of social value (p.19), *must* play.

The language adopted situates businesses as the driving force of social transformation through a number of discursive acts. First, by absencing charities altogether in some sentences, and placing businesses in primary position: 'The government recognises that prosperity and wellbeing depend primarily on the work of businesses, local public services and communities themselves...' (p.20). Second, by assigning expertise to charities and social enterprises, but power to business: 'harness the expertise of charities and social enterprises and the power of the private sector' (p.20). Indeed, private business is afforded the title 'sector', whilst what was the third or voluntary sector is reduced to its constituent parts.

The idea that the Big Society and now the Civil Society Strategy had or have little substance (Civil Exchange, 2015; Preston, 2018), and can therefore be ignored, is a dangerous one. Shining a light on what is foregrounded and backgrounded in the language and ideology of this kind of strategy becomes particularly important during times of political uncertainty and upheaval. It may well mark a dramatic change in the relationship of the state to welfare providers and citizens.

## **Conclusion**

We can only speculate on the primary drivers behind the strategy, though it may have been partly designed to counter recent criticism over a policy vacuum surrounding the sector (Cook, 2017). Perhaps, given the deluge of troubling headlines over the process to leave the EU, and the resultantly strained capacity of the civil service or politicians to deliver a domestic agenda, there is also pressure to highlight positive activity in an area that generally remains relatively uncontentious in political terms. There is certainly ministerial buy in, with no less than seven ministerial statements

included; Jeremy Wright, the culture secretary, has also directly linked the Civil Society Strategy to the Industrial Strategy agenda, which is reflected in the emphasis on people and place within both reports (DDCMS, 2018b; see HM Government, 2017).

The Civil Society Strategy presents little in the way of new funding or major policies, but it is likely to strongly influence the tone of the debate and conversation between the voluntary sector and government. The strategy is best read not as a manifesto, but as a statement of intent, setting the general direction of travel. We should not disregard the obvious positive that there is a strategy at all, given the lack of recent policy discourse on the voluntary sector, alongside welcome developments, instances of self-reflection and potential avenues for the sector to influence future policy. However, this policy analysis highlights the potential risks for civil society and voluntary organisations, who may find themselves narratively positioned into a role they arguably should not be fulfilling, substituting for government or attempting to address the impact of its financial, social, and European policies. The general discourse of the strategy raises important questions for the sector in terms of identity, with, once again, what counts as civil society determined by government.

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