



Manchester  
Metropolitan  
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Manchester Metropolitan University  
Community Audit and Evaluation Centre  
Community North West

# Surviving, Thriving or Dying



*Whalley Range Forum, Manchester,  
Celebrate Your Alley Gate project*

Resilience and small community groups  
in the North West of England

## Summary

(June 2012)

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What are the  
resilience needs and  
strategies that will  
help the survival of  
small voluntary and  
community sector  
organisations in the  
North West?

# Summary

## Research Report

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Manchester Metropolitan University and Community North West

Eve Davidson, Research Associate, June 2012

This research took place between July 2011 and February 2012, during a period of unprecedented change within the voluntary and community sector. The responses from 215 groups across the North West with incomes of less than £50,000 pa (70% less than £10,000, 15% no income) shows the diversity and fragility of these groups as well as indicating the requirements needed for their resilience and survival.

The research was carried out as part of the Taking Part Capacity Building Research Cluster, based at the Community Audit and Evaluation Centre at Manchester Metropolitan University, which is working with research partners across the country. Community North West, a small but vibrant regional organisation identified the need for the research, and supported a participatory approach, with representatives of community groups devising the questions, and discussing the findings at seminars and a Resilience Conference.

The survey results show that not only is there an increased demand for the services and resources provided by small voluntary and community groups (VCS), particularly those working with 'disadvantaged' groups, but that crucially these groups are struggling to survive.

The groups who are most resilient and likely to survive are those who are involved in self help, rely on their own volunteers and have their own income. In the main, these are groups who have incomes of less than £10,000 pa and identify themselves as community groups (126 respondents).

However these groups also value professional support and small amounts of resourcing, sometimes shared use of premises or facilities although this inter-dependence can often make small groups vulnerable.

The groups who are least resilient are those who provide services for 'vulnerable groups', have paid staff and rely significantly on external funding e.g. from Local Authorities. The findings also show that small VCS groups take for granted and value the provision of information, training and other support that has been provided by organisations who are themselves at risk (e.g. Councils for Voluntary Service).

Fitzsimons *et al* (2011<sup>1</sup>) suggest that for groups to be resilient, like individuals they need confidence, a sense of purpose and 'pro-social bonding', that is, links to other groups both for support, and resourcing, problem solving and empowerment. However this research shows that pressure on groups in relation to increased demands for services and reduced resources to meet this have resulted in increased tension between groups who are competing for funding and resources. This therefore reduces the potential for partnership and effective communication so making the groups less sustainable and resilient.

The full Report looks at other recent studies which have examined the impact of spending cuts on the voluntary and community sector (VCS) and in particular the effect on those groups active in England's most deprived areas and most marginal communities. The Report also examines resilience models which explore how best to measure and build community resilience and the vital role that small community groups can play in contributing to this process.

<sup>1</sup> Fitzsimons, A, Hope, M, Cooper, C, Russell, K. (2011) *Empowerment and Participation in Youth Work*, Learning Matters

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### Key Research Findings

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#### Responses

The survey received **215 responses** with the majority of responses coming from Groups from Greater Manchester, and Lancashire, with a spread of responses from the other sub-regions. Most respondents were from long established groups with **67% in existence for five years or more**.

#### Types of Groups

Most respondents described their groups as Community groups, voluntary organisations, or as a charity. However there were **46** responses that described their groups as a Social Enterprise / Company Ltd by Guarantee / CIC which amounted to over 21% of the responses received.

#### Purpose and aims

Most groups described their purpose as providing community support, neighbourhood activity, and bringing different groups together in the community. However some groups were set up with a particular remit and have then diversified to meet new needs or attract new funding streams.

#### Beneficiaries and activities

Groups were working with a wide spread of beneficiaries though most benefited the general public, or residents of a particular neighbourhood.

#### Examples of activities include:

- Improving the natural and recreational assets of the area, consulting with local authority about changes, keeping local people informed and seeking funding for improvements.
- Influencing the services planned and priorities in learning disabilities by sharing information, expertise and local knowledge.
- Reassuring the residents that their problems will be heard and acted upon.

#### Supporting vulnerable groups

**87** groups however are providing services to individuals with particular or specialised needs that are vulnerable or at risk.

#### Examples of this specialised support include:

- Supporting and advocating on behalf of young people 5-18 years old, especially those from African and Caribbean descent and their families.
- Meeting the religious needs of Muslim children with Special Needs.

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- Women's Transport service for vulnerable groups.
- Providing support services for women suffering domestic abuse.
- Foodbank; Credit Union.
- Support Group for Asian Women with disabilities.

### Groups providing services to those that are vulnerable are at risk

The survey shows that many of these types of groups may face closure in the near future despite increasing demand for their services.

- 51.30% may end within the next three years.
- 78.8% have had their activities affected by public sector funding cuts.
- 85.5% of groups' income has either stayed the same or fallen since last year.
- 80.2% expect demand for services to increase over the next year.

### Income

Just fewer than **70%** of groups had income of less than **£10k**, with nearly **15%** having no income. **47%** had **£0 – less than 5k** income so only needed a small amount from different sources in order to survive.

### Sources of Income

Most income comes from groups organising own fundraising activity, individual donations, Local Authority grant aid, trading goods and services and lottery funding. Most groups are maximising their income from a number of sources in order to help with their sustainability.

### Groups affected by Funding cuts by public bodies

Nearly **two thirds** of these small groups replied that they had been affected by funding cuts by the Local Authority or other public bodies this year.

### Income levels this year

Nearly **85%** of all groups said that their income had either stayed the same or fallen compared to last year. Many commented that the Local Authority was not able to provide small grants this year which they had been dependent on and other funding sources were drying up. There is more competition for resources, and a knock on effect on membership and activity.

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### How long can groups continue with their activity?

The survey asked how long respondents expected to continue with their group's activities. While over **58%** said they would be able to continue long term, the remaining **42%** said that they may close between **six months and three years**.

### Groups most under threat

The responses show that it is groups that have been longest in existence that are most under threat of closure: **62% of groups that had been set up for over five years said that they expected to end within the next three years**. This means that the most experienced groups were fearful of the future and their ability to survive.

### Social Enterprises at risk

**48.6% of those groups that have formally constituted themselves as Community Interest Companies or social enterprises, or Companies Ltd by Guarantee say they may end within three years**. Almost a half of these groups reported that they had had a significant decrease in their funding since last year.

### Demand for Services

Over **68%** of respondents commented that demand for services from their groups would **increase** over the next year. Many organisations expressed their concerns about coping with increasing demand due to the recession, with less resources including support from the Local Authority.

### Valuing their work?

Many groups felt that statutory bodies valued the work of their group, and understood the nature and role of their group. However a high number of groups said that this was not the case and they were also not informed on issues which affected them or were subjected to tokenistic consultation.

### Support on offer

Local Authorities and other statutory bodies have given vital support to these groups in the past mainly in the form of small grants. Council for Voluntary services and other local networks also give support. **A large number of small groups are not receiving support from any of these organisations.**

### What will help groups to continue?

Groups asked for more funding opportunities, funding advice or support, help with finding more volunteers. However many groups also would value being part of a local network and more training opportunities.

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### Recommendations

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#### **Small CVS groups will develop more resilience by:**

- Seeking a range of partners to develop and support community self help activity e.g. for funding, the provision of premises and resourcing e.g. local businesses, Housing Associations, Trade Unions, and schools, colleges/ Universities.
- Setting up peer support networks (e.g. online), and opportunities to meet both locally and regionally to discuss and organise around common concerns.
- The provision of core costs – even small amounts of funding up to £500 may help these groups survive.
- Providing advice and support regarding funding opportunities and accessing alternative sources of funding, and encouragement, advice and support with regard to becoming financially more self-reliant including help with valuing the social outcomes of groups' activity to be used as a valuable evidence base.
- Adopting a partnership approach by CVS groups to tackle community issues.
- Supporting CVS groups by helping to attract volunteers and providing training and networking opportunities for members and volunteers.
- Acknowledging that small CVS groups are not able to meet the needs of many people through self help alone e.g. in 'deprived' communities and from vulnerable groups. Local capacity building and potential is restricted by factors that require trained workers, expertise and resourcing.
- The tackling of factors such as unemployment, discrimination, poverty, and disadvantage must be prioritised at a structural level to enable small CVS groups to act as a creative bridge, rather than replacement, for essential services.

A full copy of this Report can be downloaded from:  
[www.mmu.ac.uk/caec](http://www.mmu.ac.uk/caec) or please contact: CAEC

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