
Developing innovative approaches to tackling complex social problems: opportunities and challenges

Voluntary Sector Studies Network Day Conference, Wednesday 9th May 2018

York Business School, York Saint John University, Lord Mayor's Walk, York

Programme

09.45 – 10.15 **Registration**, coffee and biscuits (De Grey Foyer)

10.15 – 10.45 **Welcome and Introduction:** Challenges and innovation in York. Joe Micheli, Head of Commissioning, Early Intervention, Prevention and Community Development, City of York Council and Sarah Armstrong, CEO, York CVS
(room DG124)

Chair: Mike Calvert, Academic Development Directorate, York Saint John University

Morning session: Tackling complex social problems (room DG124)

10.45 – 11.15 **Presentation 1:** Voluntary Sector mental health crisis support: a landscape of opportunity, creativity and fragility. Rebecca Ince, Third Sector Research Centre/Health Services Management Centre, University of Birmingham

11.15 – 11.45 **Presentation 2:** Collaborating 'informally' to create Social Value. Akash Puranik, Public Leadership and Social Enterprise, Open University Business School

11.45 – 12.15 **Presentation 3:** The Opportunities and Challenges for Social Enterprises in the Early Years Sector. Zoe Raven, CEO, Acorn Early Years Foundation, Milton Keynes

Chair: Mike Hemmings, York Business School, York Saint John University

12.15 – 12.30 Information Exchange/research sharing (room DG124)

12.30 – 12.45 General Meeting (room DG124)

12.45 – 13.45 Lunch (De Grey Foyer)

Afternoon session: Developing innovative approaches

13.45 – 14.15 **Presentation 4:** Is a Social Impact Bond (SIB) an effective mechanism for addressing complex 'wicked issues'? The case of social prescribing. Chris Dayson, Sheffield Hallam University, Alec Fraser, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Toby Lowe, Newcastle University

14.15 – 14.45 **Presentation 5:** Disrupting Discourse: Youth Volunteering and Social Action.
Alison Body and Emily Lau, Canterbury Christ Church University

Chair: Mike Calvert, Academic Development Directorate, York Saint John University

14.45 – 15.15 Mid afternoon tea and biscuits (De Grey Foyer)

15.15 – 15.45 **Presentation 6:** Innovation and social challenges: re-thinking and re-framing the narrative. Helen Britton, Helen Britton Associates/ Education, Skills, Consultancy, Director, Visiting Fellow, Open University

15.45 – 16.15 **Presentation 7:** Real solutions and/or gimmicky distractions? Social Enterprises using smartphone apps to address complex social problems.
Sheila Cannon, Trinity Business School, Trinity College, Dublin and Raymond Dart, Trent School of Business, Trent University, Canada

Chair: Mike Hemmings, York Business School, York Saint John University

16.15 Finish

Presentation 1:**Voluntary sector mental health crisis support – a landscape of opportunity, creativity and fragility.**

Dr Rebecca Ince, Third Sector Research Centre/Health Services Management Centre, University of Birmingham.

With contributions from the University of Birmingham ConVS team: Karen Newbigging, John Mohan, Alex Davis, Suzanne Bourke, Barbara Norden, Michael Ashman, Ceridwen Dare and Doreen Joseph, and James Rees of The Open University.

This paper uses examples from an NIHR study of voluntary sector mental health crisis support to show that a mental health crisis often represents a nexus of personal, social and political issues and presents an opportunity for services to address them in combination. We examine a range of services which address multiple social problems both implicitly and explicitly, in a variety of creative ways. These are grouped into four broad and overlapping types, which are: 1. Explicit attempts to address multiple needs, such as a hardship service tackling financial crisis and mental health; 2. Explicit attempts to address inequalities in availability of services for particular groups, such as bespoke crisis support for hearing impaired people or Asian women; 3. Organisational and methodological creativity, such as a co-produced peer-run mental health crisis helpline; and 4. Innovative partnership responses to context-specific needs such as multi-agency suicide prevention at Beachy Head, Eastbourne.

However, whilst illuminating positive efforts across the sector, this paper also argues that innovation in crisis support is piecemeal in nature, addressing fragments of the problem or process. Promising initiatives are vulnerable to precarious funding as well as expectations of impacts which can be difficult to evidence (e.g. reducing hospital admissions), and thus have limited ability to generate systemic change. In fact, a discernible system at either local or national scale is largely absent (despite top-down policy initiatives such as the Crisis Care Concordat) and the emerging field is instead characterised by short-term experimentation and fragile local assemblages of individual organisations or services, VS networks, parts of the NHS, police and local authorities. Through the process of mapping services across a region, we illustrate that this situation reproduces enduring geographical inequalities in access to support, reinforcing the ‘postcode lottery’ reputation of the UK’s health and welfare services.

Dr Rebecca Ince is a Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham. Her research covers health and environmental policy, spanning Social Policy and Geography. Becky’s projects illuminate how networks of people and organisations provide services in different and unique contexts, and how relational dynamics impact service provision and equality of access. Becky is committed to co-produced research and has worked closely with service users, co-operatives, national and local voluntary sector organisations and local and national government. **Contact:** r.n.ince@bham.ac.uk Twitter @incyBwincy Tel: 0121 414 3673 (Health Services Management Centre) or 0121 414 8975 (Third Sector Research Centre)

Presentation 2:
Collaborating 'informally' to create Social Value

Akash Puranik, Open University Business School

The complex societal issues such as poverty, inequality and social inclusion are considered 'inherently multi-organisational', and hence, inter-organisational collaborations are increasingly considered significant as a means of tackling them (Pittz & Intindola, 2015; Bryson et al., 2006; Huxham and Vangen, 2005; Huxham, 1996). My research work explores organising process of a unique type of such projects: informal collaborations where collaborators explicitly prioritise verbal agreements and base interactions on mutual trust and reciprocity, overtly favouring social coordination over contractual.

Data collection (in form of notes of participant observation, descriptive reflections, photos, videos, documents, social media posts, semi structured interviews) for this focused ethnography of 18 months (June 2016 – December 2017) took place through deep immersion within these projects in multiple roles. I draw on in-depth descriptions of two projects to discuss the processual aspects of the innovative organising:

1. ShareFair: a collaborative project piloted by Eden Project Communities (Eden Project, 2017), where the participating organisations and individuals set up a moneyless day-market events encouraging people to share skills, stories, things and community spirit. Similar to the happenings on the day, organising is grounded in informality, reciprocity and trust.
2. Rock4Refugees: an annual event organised by Guildford People to People (GP2P, 2017), which is a non-political, grassroots, non-registered community organisation operating as a spontaneous network of like-minded people that supplies humanitarian aid to refugees across Europe; raised funds similarly supporting informal non-registered networks that utilise this flexibility in solving unpredictable issues surrounding the refugee crisis.

Early insights suggest fascinating boundary work by organisational actors in separating the 'social' and 'work'. While managing the 'how to' the personal and subjective social values are continuously imposed to actively move formal organising to the background and forefront. As this is an ongoing investigation, the key purpose here is to discuss these preliminary insights, explore usefulness of such organising towards tackling social issues and raise questions for development.

References

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Akash Puranik is a doctoral research student at The Open University working on the project 'Creating Collaborative Advantage for Public and Social Value'. His work explores how non-contractual, informal collaborations, set up with the intention of benefitting communities, are organized. Akash's background in service and education industry, involvement with numerous charities as well as his personal interest in ethical and moral implications of 'working together' inform his research work.

Presentation 3:

The Opportunities and Challenges for Social Enterprises in the Early Years Sector

Zoe Raven, Founder and CEO of Acorn Early Years Foundation

The importance of high quality early years care and education is well recognised, particularly for socially disadvantaged children and families, but austerity and growing inequality are adding to the problem of affordability. The early years sector in the UK is a mixed economy of private, maintained and voluntary nurseries and other settings, and funded early years education places are intended to help narrow the attainment gap for children starting school by providing 'free' nursery education places. Recent policy changes extended this entitlement to help working parents afford childcare, but this has proved highly controversial, with protests about insufficient funding rates and accusations that affluent families benefit more than those most in need.

The marketisation of the childcare sector, combined with a dramatic decrease in local authority services, means that there is a real danger of government funding contributing to, rather than helping to solve, inequality in the availability and quality of provision. Proposing that healthy lunches could be 'optional extras' is just one example of this. There is, however, a growing interest in alternatives to corporate childcare from social enterprises and charitable organisations, and increasing opportunities for partnerships between organisations in the maintained and third sector.

This paper briefly explains why the marketization of the sector makes current funding arrangements ineffective, and how the confusion of motives behind the current policy exacerbates the affordability problem for working families. It then describes how some local initiatives have proved successful in providing affordable high quality early years services. Key success factors have been the creation of social enterprises with charitable status, working in partnership with other organisations, and using cross-subsidy models. The advantages and challenges for social enterprises in the early years sector will be explored, including their hopes and fears looking ahead in the current economic climate.

Zoe Raven is the founder and CEO of Acorn Early Years Foundation, a charity and social enterprise which provides childcare and early education in Milton Keynes, Northants and Bedfordshire, and she also has experience of working in schools, universities and other charities. She is currently a part-time PhD student at Royal Holloway, University of London, researching the challenges faced by organisations trying to provide affordable, high-quality childcare in areas of social disadvantage. **Contact:** zoe@acornearlyyears.org.uk 01908 870331/ 07831 653695 Twitter: @zoeanneraven

Presentation 4:

Is a Social Impact Bond (SIB) an effective mechanism for addressing complex 'wicked' issues? The case of social prescribing

Chris Dayson, Sheffield Hallam University*, **Alec Fraser**, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, **Toby Lowe**, Newcastle University

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Social prescribing (SP) and Social Impact Bonds (SIBs) are two current policy agendas affecting voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations (VCSEs) involved in UK health and social care services. *SP* is a new type of local health and social care service which aims to connect people with long term health conditions to activities and support provided by VCSEs at a community level. *SIBs* are a mechanism for commissioning public services that draw on non-government investors to resource interventions up-front, with public bodies only reimbursing investors if and when agreed performance targets have been met. Both *SP* and *SIBs* have emerged in the past ten years and are associated with a wider trend in social welfare democracies in which national and local government, constrained from investing in public services by fiscal austerity, are increasingly keen to explore innovative ways of financing and implementing interventions that address purportedly intractable and complex 'wicked' social issues.

In this paper we compare the parallel development and implementation of *SP* in two English commissioning contexts. The first is a large and long term *SP* service in Newcastle commissioned through a *SIB*. The second is a similarly extensive *SP* service in Rotherham commissioned through a traditional model. The article compares the ways that these two *SP* services responded to complexity throughout their development and implementation as a way to draw out the similarities and differences between them. Our central research question is as follows:

Is a SIB an effective way to respond to the complexity of commissioning and delivering social prescribing?

Our central finding is that the practices and processes of developing both SP services were broadly similar and characterised by the neo-corporate principles of trust and inter-dependency often associated New Public Governance (NPG) (Osborne, 2006 and 2010), but they diverged considerably during implementation. Whilst the non-SIB SP service remained true to its neo-corporate origins and was adaptive and complexity-consistent in its approach, in the SIB funded SP service New Public Management (NPM) principles took hold, relationships became adversarial and transactional, and the service was less able to respond to complexity as a result. Thus, we argue that a SIB might not be the most effective commissioning response for the delivery of social prescribing, particularly if there is willingness to pursue a traditional commissioning approach.

In progressing this argument our contribution is threefold. First, we make a contribution to the nascent literature on SP, shedding new light on different approaches to financing and commissioning services. Second, we make a contribution to the similar emergent literature on SIBs, highlighting the challenges associated with their implementation in complex commissioning situations. Finally, we make a theoretical contribution to the study of Public Administration and Management (PAM), building on debates about NMP and NPG, to highlight the competing principles of these approaches create divergent responses to complexity, and suggest that complexity informed approaches will be vital to the study of PAM, SIBs and SP moving forward.

Chris Dayson is a Principal Research Fellow in the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University. Since 2014 he has led a programme of research and evaluation into the implementation and impact of numerous local social prescribing initiatives, including a long term evaluation of the high profile Rotherham Social Prescribing Service. Chris is also a member of the Voluntary Sector Studies Network (VSSN) Steering Group and Practice Editor of Voluntary Sector Review.

Dr Alec Fraser is a Research Fellow at the Policy Innovation Research Unit (PIRU) at London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. His main research interests relate to the relationship between evidence and policy making in health care and other sectors in the UK and internationally as well as the politics of Major Service Change within health care systems. Alec's most recent research has focused on the application of Social Impact Bonds to health and social care.

Dr Toby Lowe is a Senior Research Associate in the Centre for Knowledge Innovation Technology and Enterprise (KITE) at Newcastle University. His research focuses on performance management and commissioning in the public and social sectors. It has explored the flaws with using outcomes as the basis for performance management and commissioning, particularly when used in Payment by Results approaches.

Presentation 5:
Disrupting Discourse: Youth Volunteering and Social Action

Alison Body and Emily Lau, Canterbury Christ Church University

This paper considers the potential role of higher education in supporting individuals, communities and organisations address complex social problems through participatory action research (PAR). Current large-scale youth action projects commonly centralise around isolated issues which require discrete solutions. Change is situated in the private sphere of the individual actor, linking outcomes to employability and social cohesion, and designed to create a certain 'type' of citizen which aligns with the dominant neoliberal ideology. We contend such approaches curtail individual's abilities to understand root causes of social issues, and as result limits ways in which they react.

Drawing inspiration from children's participation, youth action and PAR literature, we present a higher education project which sought to '*disrupt*' the current neo-liberal, market driven discourse surrounding youth social action. The project worked with 160 third year early-years undergraduate students, to investigate, explore and co-construct their views and action concerning issues experienced by one of five local community charities working with and/or on behalf of young children. Students then co-researched with over 400 younger children aged 2-10 years old in PAR projects to seek ways in which to address these social issues.

Prior to project instigation, baseline survey data revealed that majority of students positioned social action, that is to achieve social change, within the sphere of the 'other'. Ongoing feedback, end of project surveys and focus groups, revealed that the process of actively engaging within a co-constructed PAR helped resituate participants, students and young children alike, as active protagonists investigating and challenging root causes of complex social issues.

We therefore argue that PAR, as a learning experience, has the potential to *disrupt* the way children and young people have become used to receiving knowledge as part of their education helping them to develop critical consciousness and engage in active enquiry. We consider how exposure to alternative experiences of social action through the educational context and championing for young children, enhanced students learning, engagement and consideration of social issues. In conclusion, we call for new alliances between children, young people, parents, practitioners, communities and voluntary sector organisations, to produce, through enquiry, critical knowledge aimed at social transformation and opening-up of authentic democratic spaces.

Alison Body is a Senior Lecturer and Faculty Director in the Faculty of Education at Canterbury Christ Church University. A former Commissioner of children's early intervention services, she has also held senior management positions across the voluntary sector, including fundraising, business management and strategic development roles. Her research interests focus on the relationship between social policy and the voluntary sector, commissioning and fundraising, and impacts this has on the lives of children, young people and their families.

Emily Lau is a Senior Lecturer and Partnership Lead for the Faculty of Education at Canterbury Christ Church University. Before joining the university, Emily was Regional Manager for national youth organisation, Envision, working with young people on social action projects in their communities. She led the charity in numerous corporate partnerships with schools across London. She also spent many years teaching overseas and volunteering for international NGOs. Her research interests include youth social action, education and the inequality gap.

Presentation 6: Innovation and social challenges: re-thinking and re-framing the narrative

Dr Helen Britton, Helen Britton Associates/ Education, Skills, Consultancy, Director
Visiting Fellow, Open University

The multi-dimensional nature of global challenges are becoming more urgent and are precipitating considerable economic and social consequences; making them difficult to address. They are unstructured, cross-cutting and relentless (Weber and Khademian, 2008). Most social problems (health, poverty, climate control) defy 'quick fix' solutions. They are highly complex, value-laden, interconnected with other problems and have significant economic implications. The growth of global economic and technological systems has and is continuing to create a disconnection between economic growth and well-being. Traditional concepts and instruments are no longer adequate to fully examine their complexity, implications or to implement activities to address these issues.

Whilst there is undoubtedly considerable interest towards innovation as a means of addressing social challenges, the diversity of areas of innovative activity is not fully exploited for their potential to provide avenues of support and recognition. This presents a dichotomy in the rhetoric of expectation and delivery. If innovative thinking and activities are identified as being central to addressing a diversity of challenges and problems, what are the barriers that make it difficult to access support, resources and research that can contribute towards addressing them? Given the importance placed on precipitating new forms of thinking for addressing complexity, why is there not more attention paid to investing in social innovation?

This paper suggests that there is a need for new forms of thinking to better understand the ever-changing nature of these challenges and to identify barriers to addressing them. It calls for a re-think of what constitutes innovative activities; a call for the development of an infrastructure for innovation; more coordinated efforts and recognition and support of new actors and multi-stakeholder modes of collective action. This presentation draws on some of the innovative multi-stakeholder activities of the author's own professional practice in both the UK and South Africa.

Dr Helen Britton is an Independent Researcher, a Visiting Fellow of the Open University, a Fellow of the Society for Education and Training and a businesswoman. She has over twenty-five years' experience in designing and delivering courses and capital projects as part of multi-stakeholder initiatives with statutory, voluntary, community and private sector partners. She manages to combine her commitment to facilitating lifelong learning with her entrepreneurial interests. Her areas of

research interest are multi-disciplinary and embrace inter-organisational and cross-sector partnership-working; organisational change and drivers of change; philanthropy, community and citizen engagement; theoretical development, dissemination and innovation; risk-taking and risk-avoidance and exploring the contradictory nature of collaboration.

Presentation 7:

Real solutions and/or gimmicky distractions? Social Enterprises using smartphone apps to address complex social problems

Sheila Cannon, Trinity Business School, Trinity College, Dublin and **Raymond Dart**, Trent School of Business, Trent University, Canada

In 2018, it is rare to experience a day without a claim of a new online platform ‘disrupting’ and transforming existing economic and social practice. From Uber to Amazon to Expedia, apps – pieces of software for mobile devices - are emerging which fundamentally challenge and transform traditional institutions. These online and networked tools enable – in particular – scope, scale and speed of transaction and service in ways that pre-internet institutions could not hope to achieve.

While the use of online technology including social media, is not new in social movements (Harlow, 2011; Myers, 1994; Wall, 2007), nor in nonprofits (Zorn, Flanagan, & Shoham, 2011), so far there has been almost no research consideration of the role(s) of apps and online platforms in civil society, social change and social innovation (Guo & Saxton, 2013). In this exploratory paper we aim to identify and analyze a new phenomenon: the use of apps to address complex social problems.

The cases: We consider three social enterprises based in Dublin, Ireland:

- **FoodCloud** uses an app that connects supermarkets with soup kitchens, allowing the two to link up easily and quickly for food collections. The app facilitates the delivery of meals to those in need, and reduces the amount of edible food that ends up in landfill.
- **ReUsing Dublin** is an app created by Space Engagers for the Peter McVerry Trust (PMVT) that crowd sources information on vacant properties that can be used to house homeless people.
- **Keep Appy** is an app created by college students in response to a growing mental health crisis. The app reminds users to check in with their own emotions throughout the day, helping them to monitor their moods.

We will situate this research in relevant literature and draw out points for discussion and further research.

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Dr Sheila Cannon is Assistant Professor in Social Entrepreneurship at Trinity Business School. Her research interests include organisational identity work, institutional complexity and deinstitutionalisation. She is particularly interested in social mission organisations and the impact of social change and commercialisation on nonprofit organisations. She teaches Social Entrepreneurship, as well as Personal and Career Development. Sheila worked in the nonprofit sector in peacebuilding organisations for over 12 years, in the Balkans and in Ireland. She has a Bachelor's degree in The Classics from Vassar College. **Contact:** Dr Sheila Cannon, Assistant Professor, Trinity Business School, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2, Ireland. cannonsh@tcd.ie +353 1 877660301

Dr. Raymond D. Dart's current research interests are diverse, and broadly centre on 'social enterprise', 'social entrepreneurship' and other organizational settings of social change environmental organizations and the environmental sector logic models, effectiveness and strategy in nonprofit organizations community development. His master's degree was in Environmental Studies, and his doctoral degree was in Organizational Behaviour at the Schulich School of Business at York University. His thesis research focused on entrepreneurship and commercialization in nonprofit sector organizations. **Contact:** Dr Raymond Dart, Associate Professor, Trent School of Business, Trent University, Canada. rdart@trentu.ca