

# Voluntary Sector Studies Network Day Conference

## Small groups, big issues? Researching local, community-based and 'below the radar' organisations and action

Thursday 23rd May 2019

The Circle, Rockingham Lane, Sheffield S1 4FW

### Programme

- 09.45 – 10.15** Registration and refreshments
- 10.20 - 10.30** Welcome and Introduction
- 10.30 – 11.30** **Opening plenary:** Lindsay Findlay-King (Northumbria University) (panel co-ordinator), Geoff Nichols (Sheffield University), Katrina Foxtton (York University), Tom Archer & Ian Wilson (Sheffield Hallam University) and Daryl Porter (Sheffield City Council)  
**Community asset transfer (CAT) of leisure facilities – small volunteer-group management**
- 11.30 – 12.00** Katherine Brown (Director of Crafting Relationships) and Sonia Liff (Volunteer at the Sir John Moore Foundation)  
**Local History Cafe at the Sir John Moore Foundation**
- 12.00 - 12.30** Alison Body (University of Kent) and Jennifer Ross (Chair of Parent Council)  
**Coproduction of primary education: A local case study analysis of the establishment of a parent council**
- 12.30 – 12.45** Information exchange/research sharing
- 12.45 – 14.00** Lunch
- 14.00 – 14.30** Jon Dean (Sheffield Hallam University)  
**Informal volunteering, gender, and class**
- 14.30 – 15.00** David Yates (Aston University)  
**Behind Closed Doors: An exploratory study of differential accounts in UK service clubs**
- 15.00 – 15.15** Break
- 15.20 – 16.20** **World café**  
Diverse local groups will contribute to understandings of the experiences of small organisations and groups and the issues they face.
- 16.30** **Finish**

## Abstracts

### Opening Plenary/panel session

#### Community asset transfer (CAT) of leisure facilities – small volunteer-group management

*Lindsay Findlay-King (Northumbria University) - panel co-ordinator*

*Geoff Nichols (Sheffield University)*

*Katrina Foxton (York University)*

*Tom Archer and Ian Wilson (Sheffield Hallam University)*

*Darrel Porter (Sheffield City Council)*

Reductions in local government funding and localism agendas have led to responsibility for the management and delivery of sports facilities, green spaces, heritage, cultural facilities and libraries being transferred to volunteer-led groups. Whilst not a new phenomenon in the U.K., as public sector reform in the 1990s led to the transfer of public-sector leisure facilities to mostly large charitable trusts, a current wave of facility transfers since local government budget cuts in 2010 has resulted in increased transfers to smaller volunteer-groups. These therefore represent a growing form of small community group volunteerism, which will be examined during this panel.

During the first presentation Lindsay, Geoff and Katrina will summarise existing research into community asset transfer in leisure; including sports facilities, libraries, arts, heritage and museums. This presentation will be based on research conducted by the presenters but will also draw on a recent collaboration meeting between researchers, policy makers and practitioners; including Power to Change, Community Leisure, the community Libraries Association and the Arts Council. This will include the driving forces, the distinctive characteristics, challenges and opportunities of CAT within this sector.

Following on from this Tom and Ian will draw on an extensive dataset of community owned land, buildings and large physical assets, to explore important spatial patterns in community ownership in England. Using this data - compiled through research co-funded by central government and Power to Change - insights will be offered into the distribution of assets, making links to key place-based characteristics and the type of asset owned. They will also share initial insights from economic assessments of community owned assets and provide information on the financial health of this sector.

Darrell, as Sheffield City Council Community Library Support Officer will then present the experience of asset transferred libraries in Sheffield, as a practice case study. This will be followed by panel and audience discussion on the practice and research challenges in leisure CAT to help shape the research agenda.

**Dr Tom Archer** is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Regional, Economic and Social Research (CRESR). Tom has several years' experience in housing, regeneration and community development, having worked in a variety of research policy roles in these fields. Tom's academic work has focused on the development of community-led housing in England, and the financialisation of private housebuilding. He has written numerous reports for central government, charitable funders and local authorities. He is currently researching the scale, distribution and financial health of community owned assets in England, as part of a large study for Power to Change.

**Dr Katrina Foxton** completed her PhD at the University of York in 2018. Her work focused upon the development of values during Community Asset Transfers of a heritage quality (either listed or scheduled ancient monuments) drawing from case studies in York. Her ethnographic methodology revealed that 'place' plays a part in the success of volunteers achieving, not only transfer, but subsequent management of their social enterprises. She is now working as a Community Officer as part of a Heritage Lottery Funded Project with Hampshire County Council and is continuing to explore the relationship between policy and 'on the ground realities' within heritage practice.

**Darrel Porter** has worked for Sheffield Libraries and Archives Service for 14 years and has been in his current role of Volunteer Coordinator for five. Darrel works on the forefront of community asset transfer acting to support and advise the 16 independent community-run libraries in Sheffield who have either had buildings transferred to them or are in the process of having them done so. Darrel sits on the shadow board of the Community Managed Libraries Peer Network, a group that provides support advice and training for community managed libraries nationwide.

## **Local History Cafe at the Sir John Moore Foundation**

### ***Katherine Brown, Crafting Relationships and Sonia Liff, Sir John Moore Foundation***

The Local History Cafe programme is a Crafting Relationships initiative of which the Sir John Moore Foundation is a member (both below the radar organisations) together with six other museums across the East Midlands. Over half of all accredited museums in the EM are 'below the radar' organisations (MDEM data) to say nothing of more informal heritage groups.

Local History Cafes (LHC) are monthly heritage and wellbeing get togethers for community members aged 50 and over, experiencing, at risk of, or looking to keep at bay social isolation and loneliness. Cafes are around two hours in length and comprise refreshments, speakers and at times an associated creative activity.

Older people and museums might seem a fairly obvious fit with both focused on the past - but research suggests that it is a bit more complicated. Dodd et al (2018) argue that such thinking is based on a medical, deficit model of ageing which risks seeing older people as no longer having any engagement with the present or with new learning. Instead the challenge, in line with a social model, is to engage older people in ways that make them active learners and co-producers of heritage initiatives. The paper will explore whether community-based 'below the radar' organisations have particular resources and ways of working that particularly suit them to developing such programmes.

The LHC programme is as much about life-long learning as it is about reminiscence. At its core is an understanding that cafes are in no way 'done to' participants and from the very start everyone is asked to contribute ideas to the pot for a programme of speakers of interest to the group. Encouraging and supporting a sense of agency amongst participants is key, and during associated ongoing mentoring and reflective discussions, we look carefully at how easy it is to accidentally disempower older participants and what we can do to move away from that mindset. The presentation will cover both Crafting Relationships' role in developing and facilitating the programme and the Sir John Moore Foundation's experience of running the programme over the last 18 months.

**Katherine Brown** is Founding Director of Crafting Relationships, a delivery, education and coaching social enterprise working on programmes with older community members and primary age children independently and together. Katherine established the Local History Cafe programme back in 2016 as a way to combat loneliness and social isolation in communities, drawing on 20 years in the third sector. [www.craftingrelationships.co.uk](http://www.craftingrelationships.co.uk)

**Dr Sonia Liff** volunteers at the Sir John Moore Foundation (a Grade I, Wren designed building which houses a primary school, heritage centre, flats and offices) where she coordinates heritage focused activities. She is also involved in local place-based activities around the environment and planning. She was previously VSSN's Executive Officer and has researched community activities around the digital divide and climate change. [www.sirjohnmoore.org.uk](http://www.sirjohnmoore.org.uk)

## **Coproduction of primary education: A local case study analysis of the establishment of a parent council**

***Alison Body (University of Kent) and Jennifer Ross (Chair of Parent Council)***

Within the UK primary schools are facing difficult times. Fiscal challenges, performance measure pressures, cuts to community support services and a teacher recruitment crisis, has created a perfect storm within which schools have to carefully navigate in order to continue to provide high quality education for their children. Coproduction, understood as contributions from service users and providers to raise the quantity and quality of public services, has become one mechanism by which many schools seek to combat these challenges. Focusing on a local case study primary school, situated in an area of high deprivation, we explore one schools experience of actively promoting a parent council.

The Oaks Primary Academy (*assigned pseudonym for confidentiality purposes*), has implemented through voluntary action, the establishment of a parent council in response to some particularly challenging times and as a way of improving parental engagement, improving school performance and learner attainment. Through ethnographic participatory action research we explore the lived experiences of the volunteers and staff in establishing this parent council over an eighteen month period and seek to investigate the effectiveness and opportunities for the parent council in the coproduction of education.

We find that pro-active engagement of parents through the parent council increases positive engagement of almost all parents across the school. Whilst we acknowledge a range of challenges in this journey we identify that key to the success of this voluntary action is clear communication, transparency and clarity of roles. Furthermore, a whole school approach where power and decision making are actively shared between the school's senior management team and parents resulted in benefits which went well beyond the school gates and had wider benefits for the local community.

These findings have implications for local voluntary action in education and more widely for coproduction of local public services.

**Alison Body** is a Lecturer in Philanthropic Studies, with the Centre for Philanthropy, University of Kent. Previously having worked in senior management positions across the voluntary and public sector, including positions of fundraising, business management, commissioning and strategic development, she is particularly interested in the relationship between philanthropy, voluntary action and the third sector, with regards to children, families and education. Recently she has

published work on commissioning of children's services, youth participation, children's views on charity, the role of philanthropy in education and the co-production of education.

**Jenny Ross** is the Parent Council Chair within a Kent Primary School. She has previous experience as a Family Support Worker within a Children's Centre and has just completed a BA (Hons) Degree in Early Childhood Studies through Canterbury Christ Church University. Jenny is due to start her teacher training in September 2019 whilst continuing to develop the parent council. The success of this new parent council for a 'Requires Improvement' school within a deprived area, has been recognised by organisations including Parentkind and features within the publication, 'The Mentally Healthy Schools Workbook', by Dr Pooky Knightsmith.

## **Informal volunteering, gender, and class**

***Jon Dean, Sheffield Hallam University***

Within the canon of research into volunteering, the type of activity that has become known as 'informal volunteering' has a strange presence. While scholars and researchers into voluntary action are always keen to stress the difference between formal volunteering (voluntary roles undertaken for nonprofit or public sector organisations) and informal volunteering (giving one's time, perhaps on an ad hoc basis, to help one's friends, neighbours or community), the former dominates the research literature, with lip service paid to the latter (Smith, D. H., 1995). This paper utilises working-class feminist theory (Skeggs, 1997, 2004a, 2004b) to critically explore the concept of informal volunteering. Informal volunteering - giving one's time on an ad hoc basis to friends and neighbours - is often forgotten within nonprofit and voluntary action research. Given that many ethnographies reveal such informal practices of care often form the basis of bonding social capital within poorer neighbourhoods, and surveys indicate women perform more of such roles, informal volunteering's illegitimate position within voluntary action research exacerbates inequalities within nonprofit thinking. By applying working-class feminist theory from Skeggs, Taylor (2005) and others, this paper aims to highlight this imbalance. It concludes that we have to understand the broader framework of privilege within which this happens, recognise the value of activities which are not currently symbolically valued as 'good' (Dean, forthcoming), and challenge the ability to value cultures dependent on 'who can deploy them as a resource' (Skeggs, 2004a: 174). Policy practitioners have to encourage bottom-up programmes of social regeneration which make best use of the existing social networks in disadvantaged communities as opposed to imposing top-down reorganisations and expectations of community life.

**Jon Dean** is Reader in Politics and Sociology at Sheffield Hallam University. His research examines youth volunteering, charitable giving and the social and cultural positioning of the voluntary sector. Recently he has worked on research looking at fundraisers attitudes towards using emotional images in fundraising appeals, examined how young people perceive and experience charity on social media, and reviewed how voluntary sector leaders see the 'state of the sector' following much-publicized recent 'crises'.

### **References**

- Dean, J (forthcoming) *Charity and the Symbolic Power of Doing Good*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Skeggs B (1997) *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*. London: Sage.
- Skeggs B (2004a) *Class, Self, Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Skeggs B (2004b) Exchange, value and affect: Bourdieu and 'the self'. In Adkins L Skeggs B (eds) *Feminism After Bourdieu*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 75-96.

Smith D H (1995) Some challenges in nonprofit and voluntary action research. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 24 (2): 99-101.  
Taylor R (2005) Rethinking voluntary work. *Sociological Review*, 53 (s2): 119-135.

## **Behind Closed Doors: An exploratory study of differential accounts in UK service clubs**

**David Yates, Aston University**

Following the recent Presidents Club scandal, the conduct of membership-based charitable organisations has attracted attention. This paper explores the external accountability of UK service clubs, in terms of what accounts are discharged, and to what extent transparency of activities exists for what are essentially, private member's clubs with a charitable fundraising and grant making focus.

This paper utilises a theoretical framework derived from existing theorisations of accountability and the accountable self and in particular focuses on the limits to the construct of the accountable self. The paper pays specific attention to informal forms of accountability between key stakeholder individuals, incorporating theorisations regarding the limits of accountability (see: Roberts, 2009; Messner 2009) and the distortive nature of accountability in terms of representing a series of events or phenomena, which potentially shields subjects from being accountable in different ways, to different stakeholders.

Forty-two semi-structured interviews were undertaken, twenty-seven of which were with service club members of service organisations. Remaining interviews were undertaken with external stakeholders. Documentary evidence in the form of member newsletters, magazines and other publicly available documents were utilised, along with participant observation sessions. These methods help to ensure coverage of both the external accountability relationships in which service clubs are involved, but also their internal, 'behind closed doors' operation.

Findings from this research relate to the differences in accounts rendered when acting within the public gaze, as opposed to in private. Accounts rendered between club members and external stakeholders involve heavy reliance on the maintenance of a public image, based on values of trust, professionalism and altruism. By contrast, accounts rendered within the club environment reflected a space where prejudice was allowed to manifest, differing from the 'policy line' of inclusion. Practical contributions recommend stronger action in ensuring clubs represent the organisation and its values at a more global level. Theoretically, this paper further explores the limits of accountability within a charitable/altruistic context.

**David Yates** is a lecturer in accounting at Aston Business School, Birmingham. He studied for his PhD at Aston, after a short career in industry in a variety of finance functions. Previously he studied both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. His research focusses on community groups, in particular, service clubs and more in general, accountability of individuals and organisations. His most recent publication, exploring internal accountability within service clubs is currently 'in press' at the journal 'Accounting Forum'  
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S015599821730220X>