

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR A BIGGER SOCIETY



“GROUNDWORK OFFERS US A UNIQUE PROPOSITION; THE ABILITY TO MAKE A REAL SUSTAINED DIFFERENCE TO THE ENVIRONMENT AT A GRASSROOTS LEVEL, IN A WAY THAT ENGAGES AND EMPOWERS THE LOCAL COMMUNITY. WE HAVE MANY GREAT PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE THIRD SECTOR, BUT WHAT GROUNDWORK OFFERS IS UNIQUE AND VERY SPECIAL TO US.”

Mike Barry
Head of Sustainable Business
Marks & Spencer

Who we are and what we do

Groundwork is a group of charities helping people and organisations make changes in order to create better neighbourhoods, to build skills and job prospects and to live and work in a greener way.

We operate across England, Wales and Northern Ireland and work on thousands of individual projects each year. We focus our activity on disadvantaged communities where we can make most difference.

Impact 2009/2010:

- Served in 98% of the most deprived areas
- Raised £123 million pound turnover from private, public and voluntary sector partnerships
- Completed 6,358 local projects, all with the specific aim of changing places and changing lives
- Enabled 5,000 personal progressions into training, employment or volunteering
- Provided 51,000 weeks of training
- Supported people to gain 8,000 formal qualifications
- Created 3,600 jobs
- Enabled 580,500 days of active community involvement by adults and young people
- Of those people we worked with 73% felt their neighbourhood is getting better and 64% felt more able to influence decisions affecting their locality
- 75% of the young people we worked with felt they were more likely to (re) engage in education or training

“GROUNDWORK HAS BEEN AN IMPORTANT PARTNER FOR 25 YEARS, PROVIDING A ONE STOP SHOP FOR DELIVERING ON IMPROVING GREEN SPACE, REDUCING ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR, OFFERING SKILLS AND TRAINING FOR EMPLOYMENT AND EMPOWERING LOCAL PEOPLE TO GET INVOLVED IN LOCAL DECISIONS.”

Graham Burgess
Chief Executive
Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council



GROUNDWORK AND THE ‘BIG SOCIETY’

‘Big Society’ has emerged as one of the most prominent, and indeed contentious policy concepts during the coalition government’s first four months in power. For some, the concept presents a real opportunity to nurture greater personal and civic responsibility, giving individuals the autonomy to solve the issues that affect their communities. For others, the concept is considered a distraction from the billions of pounds worth of cuts that will be made to the public sector and a way of ‘rolling back the state’.

Mixed views aside, Groundwork can play a range of roles to enable poorer and more disadvantaged communities to be able to realise the aims of the ‘Big Society’ in their own neighbourhood.

Thematic role

1. Developing residents' capacity

The government's concept of the 'Big Society' includes the aspiration that communities take greater control over the destiny of their locality and take greater responsibility for delivering public services. For example, community groups coming together to run local amenities such as parks and community halls, or establishing 'Free Schools'. Some communities will find it easier to do this than others and it is likely that areas with higher levels of middle class professionals will be better equipped to rise to this challenge due to the skills they have developed in the course of their employment history. In contrast, communities with high levels of long-term unemployment are likely to be less well equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge and access to strategic networks.

For the 'Big Society' vision to be realised, it will require communities to develop increased capacity and skills. As the very first step, this will include 'soft' skills such as increased confidence and individuals' ability to work effectively in partnership, both with other members of the community and with stakeholders in the public and private sector. Groundwork is well placed to help contribute to this as the organisation's activities are already achieving these outcomes.

2. Harnessing the value of public space

Public space is widely recognised by academics, planners and regeneration practitioners as playing an important role in developing an active citizenry. Whether considered in those terms or not, most accept that pleasant and well functioning spaces that are open to all and allow people to meet and converse are important to the fabric of society. Many of the ideas coming out of the coalition government with regard to 'Big Society' rely upon individuals coming together to take control of the issues affecting their

locality, running an important public service, for example. For this to be achieved, social interaction and communication will be important.

Public spaces are important as they serve as a useful, local, everyday resource. Public spaces may be the focus of 'Big Society' type activity, for example the government's suggestion that communities could come together to maintain local amenities such as parks. Public spaces may also facilitate 'Big Society' activity, for example a public library might be used as a community space where local activists can meet.

Much of Groundwork's project activity is focused around involving communities in the improvement of public spaces. Groundwork has the potential to play an important role in harnessing the value of public space – both in terms of utilising public space improvement projects as a way of bringing members of the community together and promoting social action, and also in the longer term by creating spaces that can be used as future sites for social interaction.

3. Encouraging social action

According to the coalition government, along with public service reform and community empowerment, social action is a key facet of their vision for the 'Big Society'. Whilst recognising that social action is a relative term meaning different things to different people, it is commonly understood as a process whereby individuals assert themselves as active citizens. Through its work in communities, Groundwork has a long standing tradition of supporting volunteering and is well placed to nurture the sense of common responsibility that social action is reliant upon. Moreover, residents are unlikely to invest their time and effort in 'doing' 'Big Society' unless they feel an initial sense of pride in where they live. Much of Groundwork's activity helps to nurture community pride either implicitly or

explicitly, thus the organisation is well placed to help nurture the conditions from which 'Big Society' type activity can emerge.

4. Promoting community empowerment

Linked to the point made above, for high levels of social action to occur in a community, and thus for 'Big Society' to be nurtured, it is vital that residents feel empowered so that they can actually make a difference to the place where they live. Groundwork has a history of community empowerment related activities. This is achieved explicitly through community consultation work and is also a 'soft' outcome of Groundwork's community-based volunteering activities.

Practical/strategic role

1. As a neutral broker

As the role of the state is reduced it will become increasingly important for the private and social sectors to work together to fill the gaps in service provision that will inevitably be a result of the coalition government's spending cuts. In contrast to the relationship between the public and private sectors and the public and social sectors, the Centre for Local Economic Strategies' work on Place Resilience has found that the links between the private and social sectors remain relatively underdeveloped. There may be instances of corporate social responsibility; however strategic relations in terms of working together to deliver services remain limited. Groundwork is well placed to act as a neutral broker between the social and private sectors as it is 'in tune' with voluntary and charity sector organisations yet it also has the capacity to engage with businesses.

2. As a provider of neighbourhood level direction to local authorities

Public sector cuts will mean that inevitably local authority roles will be lost, including within community development teams. Whilst the coalition government probably

intends 'Big Society' to develop organically with limited state intervention, local authorities will need to ensure that they continue to consider the needs of their most vulnerable residents who will be most susceptible to the impact of spending cuts. This means that local authorities' community engagement activities will continue to be important, as will the need to keep people informed on neighbourhood level issues. Groundwork is well placed to support local authorities in this role.

3. As a trusted local 'face'

As the impact of the spending cuts starts to take effect, i.e. the loss of local services, there may be a rise in hostility towards local public sector bodies.

Groundwork has forged long established links with local communities and is a trusted 'face' in many localities. As such, the organisation is well placed to act as a conduit between central/local government and communities and has the potential to disseminate the ideas that underpin the 'Big Society' at the local level.

4. As an influencer of government policy

The 'Big Society' remains relatively undefined. This clearly presents challenges to Groundwork, and other third sector organisations: in particular, weighing up whether to buy into a concept that might prove unsuccessful and / or unpopular with the public. However, the fact that the principles of 'Big Society', and the policies to emerge from it, remain apparently undecided means that there is an opportunity for Groundwork UK to engage with central government in shaping the agenda.

Jessica Smith is a Policy Researcher with the Centre for Local Economic Strategies, a national 'think-do' organisation based in Manchester. www.cles.org.uk

**“GROUNDWORK’S ACTIVITIES
HAVE HAD A POSITIVE
IMPACT ON THOUSANDS
OF OUR RESIDENTS,
WHETHER THROUGH
PROVIDING VOLUNTEERING
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TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT
PROGRAMMES OR
DELIVERING PROJECTS
THAT BRING COMMUNITIES
TOGETHER TO IMPROVE
THE LOCAL ENVIRONMENT.”**

Cllr Lee Rowley
Cabinet Member
Westminster City Council



BIG IDEAS TO OVERCOME BIG PROBLEMS

The 'Big Society' is already happening. In Whitby, in July, 800 people took part on a Saturday morning in choosing projects for participatory budgets. Visiting Cumbria not long ago demonstrated that neighbourliness was the norm where those with transport often take those without to the nearest town to shop. In my inner London ward the local church has set up a trust, not to proselytise, but to give good practical assistance to parts of the parish with special needs that the local authority struggles to meet. Homework clubs, coffee mornings, and befriending are all in the mix. The new government wants to see more of this, and rightly so.



This kind of support is so often much better provided by the community and not the local authority, whether it is being quantified in terms of quality of output or financial input. But with the government committed to localism, and the devolution of power and resources, there is also a role for local councils and their councillors. On the church trust I am the councillor representative.

'Big Society' ideas, generated by our communities may still need the backing, endorsement and involvement of local councils. Planning approvals, projects that link in with local social care provision and all sorts of other aspects will involve the local authority. And the coalition is keen to devolve even more power down to local authorities. It is important, therefore, that we have councillors who truly represent, and engage with, the communities they serve.

So, should Groundwork have a role encouraging people to get involved in the local democratic process? This was one of the challenging questions Groundwork asked itself at a recent meeting in Manchester attended by Groundworks' directors and managers.

There is no better way to ensure that a local authority understands its communities than to have community members and activists as councillors. This often happens anyway but perhaps the sections of our community that are most deprived and feel most disenfranchised, are where the effort should go in growing a greater understanding of, and participation in, the democratic process.

Groundwork is expert in delivering community projects, engaging with people and making a difference. But, if politicians are serious about the mantra of ensuring that localism means that we are not doing things 'to' communities, but 'with them' we need to encourage third sector organisations to do what Groundwork is doing, and that involves thinking seriously about how they

leave a positive, long term legacy.

Part of this could legitimately be helping to encourage community participation in the democratic process, not just by voting, but by putting themselves forward as candidates for election.

As with many things this is easier said than done. For a start Groundwork and other third party organisations must be apolitical. There is a fine line to tread then, between encouraging political participation, but not being seen to favour any particular political party.

What Groundwork is in a position to do, is to help 'grow' the talent. With most deprived communities, or indeed any other types of community, there is not necessarily a quick fix, so let's not expect rapid results. But a start is just letting people know that becoming a councillor IS a possibility. Help them to build skills and confidence, perhaps by encouraging other forms of involvement, through local community groups, tenants and residents associations, and school governors, as an end in itself or a step on the way. Explain what these roles involve in terms of commitment and expertise.

Often a barrier to some people, is, for example, a fear of making speeches in public. Well, people can of course be trained to do this, but at least as useful is explaining that actually, this isn't the most important skill.

More often what is needed it is the ability to listen, not speak, the ability to be passionate about what your area needs, a skill to relate to people on a personal basis, and to work with others in a collaborative way. Skills which many people possess naturally. Local leadership skills can be developed and encouraged.

The current profile of the average councillor is of a white, 59-year-old male. And yes, we need people like them on our councils, but the very best local authorities are the ones where there is a wide spread of experience, where you have the young,

the old, those with academic or professional qualifications or those without, who offer a real understanding of life as it is lived in the communities the council most needs to serve.

I am often asked what qualifications you need to become a councillor. Apart from the legal requirements to live or work in the council area and be over 18, the really essential ingredient, to my mind, is a passion for your local area. That requires no particular examination certificates, but those with that essential qualification often fear that they do not have the skills for the job. But if there is going to be greater devolution of resources and powers, we need to ensure these are used to connect to the aspirations and needs of all our citizens.

Groundwork's imaginative, practical approach to bringing about change where it is needed, is one that is completely in tune with the 'Big Society' and localism.

So in conclusion, my message to Groundwork is that many of the communities you work with will have talented, engaged individuals who can add a great deal to their local councils. I am delighted that you are also thinking about democratic involvement, and how it can be achieved. You have the community links, you have the community infrastructure, over to you...

Clare Whelan is a councillor on the London Borough of Lambeth, a member of Lambeth's Groundwork Steering group, and leads for the Conservatives nationally on Local Government Leadership's BeACillr programme. www.beacouncillor.org.uk

“GROUNDWORK HAS OPERATED EFFECTIVELY AND EFFICIENTLY TO PROVIDE SUSTAINABLE, INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS TO THE MANY CHALLENGES OUR COMMUNITIES FACE, WHILST PROVIDING TRUE VALUE FOR MONEY. I AM SURE THAT THE COUNCIL AND ITS COMMUNITY WOULD BE VERY CONCERNED IF GROUNDWORK COULD NO LONGER PROVIDE THE FULL RANGE OF SERVICES CURRENTLY ENJOYED.”

Martin Connor
Chief Executive
Selby District Council



CASE STUDIES

[St James' Community Development Project](#)

The St James' Community Development Project in Oldham aims to develop the capacity, the type of activities and the number of local people engaged in voluntary activities.

Over the past three years more than 17 groups have developed in the St James' area as a result of the project. As well as 'friends' groups these include innovative ideas like a Viking event at an ancient Viking settlement in Sholver Green, and 'Brew and Wii' sessions where the group held coffee mornings and invited young and old to have fun with interactive games. The project has also built the capacity of volunteers by training them in a wide range of skills from First Aid, food hygiene and computer skills to balloon modelling and face painting. The project gives local people the support they need to address local issues and make their community a better place to live.



GreenAiders

A community volunteering project in the boroughs of Dacorum and Watford, GreenAiders provides opportunities for local volunteers to help vulnerable residents who are unable to manage their own gardens, and who may be at risk of losing their homes and independence. Volunteers are given training and equipment and take part in supervised gardening activities managed by Groundwork.

There is clear evidence that well maintained gardens reduce the threat of crime and anti-social behaviour for vulnerable or elderly people. Decent gardens also ensure that elderly people can enjoy the benefits of being outdoors and maintain their independence. GreenAiders helps people to stay living in their own homes by providing support for their gardening work, which for many has become overwhelming. The householders, many of whom live alone and are quite isolated, also enjoy the social benefits of having friendly, local volunteers visit.

Volunteers also enjoy the experience. Sonia, a regular GreenAiders volunteer, says she enjoys: “the opportunity to get some exercise and meet new people whilst doing something that has such a benefit to the quality of someone’s life.”



The Waterworks Estate

Residents on the Waterworks Estate in Birmingham have transformed their neighbourhood from a place where drug dealing, prostitution and vandalism were the norm into a place seen as a model of community action visited by William Hague as well as delegations from Strathclyde Police, Lyon in France and Mexico City.

Working in partnership with Groundwork and the police, residents on the estate developed neglected areas into well-maintained green spaces and transparent accessible public areas backed up with security cameras and a gating scheme. The community has also established a youth club held at a nearby church that regularly attracts 70 young people and the estate is now a place where people feel proud to live.

“I thought enough is enough and was fed up with no-one doing anything about it,” said Chris Hoare, who has lived on the estate for thirty years and is one of the driving forces behind the changes. “This is now one of the safest places in England as regards crime.”

“GROUNDWORK HAS BEEN AN INVALUABLE, ENDURING PARTNER FOR MANCHESTER CITY COUNCIL. I PERSONALLY KNOW AND VALUE THE WORK THEY UNDERTAKE IN MY WARD AND THROUGHOUT MANCHESTER’S DEPRIVED NEIGHBOURHOODS, WHERE THEY ARE SUPPORTING OUR MOST VULNERABLE RESIDENTS TO DEVELOP THEIR SKILLS AND WORK TOGETHER TO IMPROVE AND LOOK AFTER THEIR LOCAL ENVIRONMENT.”

Cllr Sir Richard Leese
Leader
Manchester City Council



The Green Patch

The Green Patch is a community allotment in the heart of the Grange and Avondale ward in Kettering. It is a vibrant, inspiring environment which offers a safe and enjoyable place for people to meet, volunteer or just have a cup of tea.

Volunteers are a diverse mix of ages, gender, experience and ability and activities range from growing vegetables, to making the tea and coffee or looking after the books. The Green Patch has inspired a popular vegetable box scheme where members of the community can purchase healthy, organic, in-season vegetables.

Groundwork holds ‘grow your own’ training sessions for local people who want to learn how to get started with gardening, day visits for groups of school children and offers exciting volunteering opportunities for anyone with a passion for horticulture and the environment.

“IN THE ECONOMICALLY CHALLENGING TIMES AHEAD, GROUNDWORK’S SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE WILL CONTINUE TO BE VITAL IN THE CITY, PARTICULARLY FOR THE WAYS IN WHICH THEY PROVIDE PRACTICAL SUPPORT AND OPPORTUNITY TO HELP THE MOST DISADVANTAGED DEVELOP THE CAPABILITY, CONFIDENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY TO CONTRIBUTE EFFECTIVELY IN COMMUNITY LIFE.”

Sir Howard Bernstein
Chief Executive
Manchester City Council



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