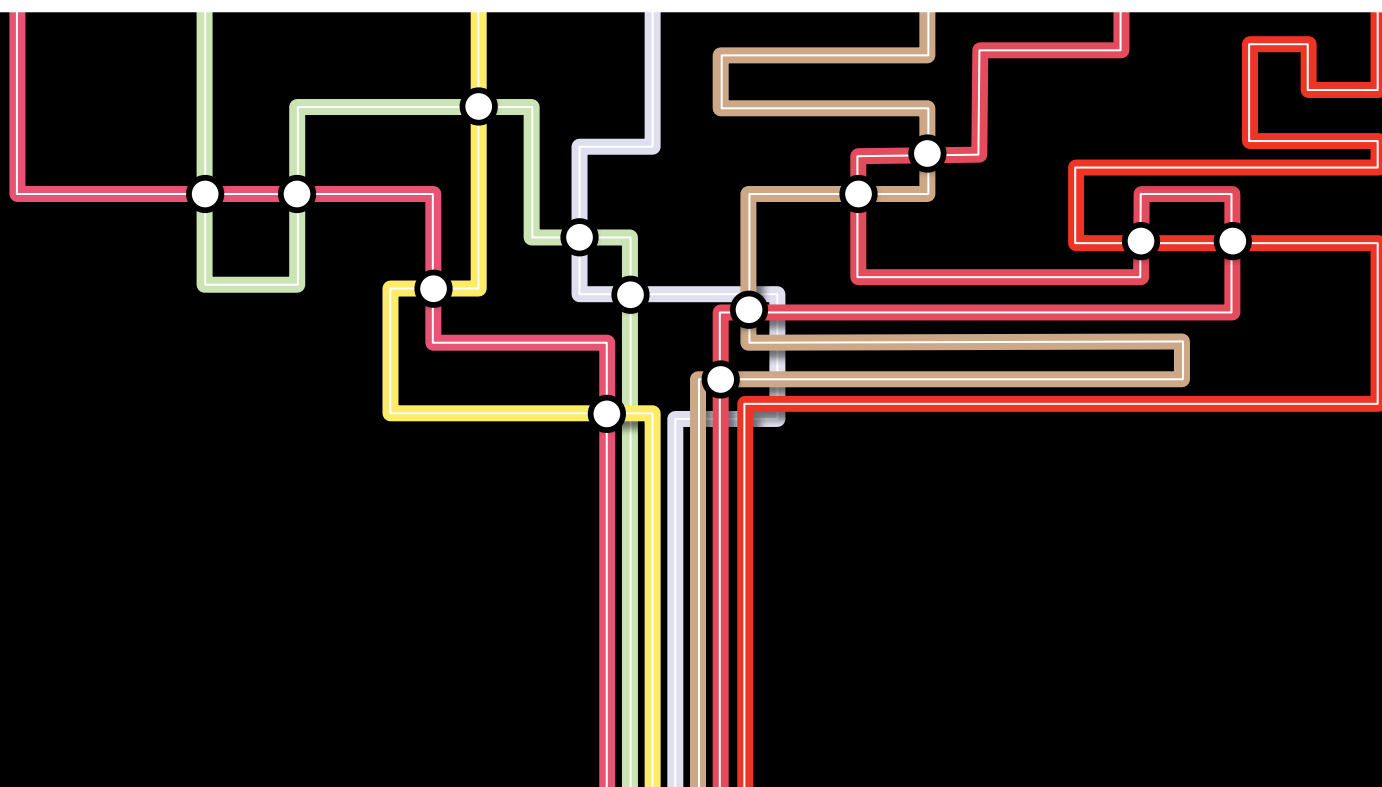


A Bearhunt
Thinkpiece



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UNDERGROUND

OVERGROUND

How small things can make Big Society

“If we don’t make the notion of Big Society more accessible and tangible we are in danger of losing a big opportunity. Big Society is not new. We have been witnessing it in small pockets throughout Britain over at least the past decade”.

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So what exactly is Big Society?

In a way you felt for them. Those, during the 2010 election campaign, who trotted out the line about the big new idea of Big Society and then braced themselves for the inevitable question..."Mmmm, so what exactly is Big Society?"

Often the question was followed by an awkward pause and then some mumbo-jumbo about disgruntled parents taking over schools. When that ran onto dodgy ground there was a grab for random words laden with nostalgia for a 1930's Britain which will never return...volunteers, community halls, whist drives and tea dances.

Not that there is anything wrong with any of these things, but they are not what Big Society is about. If we don't make the notion of Big Society more accessible and tangible we are in danger of losing a big opportunity.

Big Society is not new. We have been witnessing it in small pockets throughout Britain over at least the past decade. It is not about yearning for a nostalgic past

that probably exists only in our minds. If we continue down that route we will miss a big opportunity to create a Big Society that can move into, and embrace, the gap left as the Government begins to 'roll back the state'.

Rather than trying to invent new gimmicks and play on comforting words, we believe that we should embrace the pockets of Big Society that already exist. We should learn from their attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and stories. Rather than create a complex array of policy, overarching strategy and techno-babble methodology, we believe that we should give communities some really simple tools and tips, to help them to take back control of their communities, and create their own form of Big Society.

This Bearhunt Thinkpiece draws on our experience over ten years working with some of Britain's most radical social entrepreneurs; visiting almost two hundred of our most deprived neighbourhoods; and demonstrating our commitment to social action by innovating and making things happen.



Case Study: The Transformer

He was born and raised in the Toxteth area of Liverpool and has never really wanted to live anywhere else. He loves his neighbourhood with a passion but for Tom Calderbank there is one thing that is guaranteed to make his blood boil. He is a lover of old buildings and the site of a crumbling edifice, most especially one in Toxteth, hurts him deeply.

For him, these buildings are things of beauty, part of his neighbourhoods cultural heritage, and if you look at them from a new perspective they can become places of opportunity.

Calderbank is an animateur who uses his passion to inspire others and move them to take extraordinary

Britain's got talent

We have to change our focus. Wherever there are issues, difficulties or problems in neighbourhoods there is a tendency for some public body or other to do a 'Needs Assessment'. Resources are committed and communities have things done to them by professionals.

Its one approach, but it totally disregards the notion that every community is blessed with latent talent, if only we can be bothered to look for it. Every community has assets and opportunities. They may not always appear to be assets and opportunities but if we change our focus away from purely looking at 'needs', it is surprising how the same landscape can take on a completely different hue.

Britain's got talent of all kinds, not just dancing dogs. Every neighbourhood has opportunity if only we look for it.



www.toxtethtownhall.org.uk
www.thebelve.org.uk
www.savetheflorrie.org.uk

action. He helped to save Toxteth Town Hall from the bulldozers and then to transform it into a thriving community and business centre. Meanwhile, Council cuts had closed down the youth club which Calderbank went to as a boy. It had been operational for over 100 years and was being allowed to crumble.

It took £1 million to bring 'The Belve' back to life as a state-of-the-art youth centre in a Victorian skin. In the process it brought a community together as they connected and pulled together bringing back to life a piece of heritage for the next generation.

In the background, Calderbank was always thinking about his 'other woman' Florrie. The Florence

Institute, or Florrie as it is known locally, was built by a past Alderman of Liverpool in memory of his daughter Florence who died aged just 19. Twenty years ago Tom felt the pain of watching it's gradual decay and dereliction and, practically penniless, determined that he was going to save the Florrie. Today, The Friends of The Florrie have raised the £6.6 million needed to create yet another amazing resource for the people of Toxteth.

Places of dereliction and decay can become places of opportunity. That's the art of the animateur.

Underground - Overground

Imagine you are a stranger in London. You are standing on a bustling street. Cyclists weave in and out of the choking traffic, whilst taxis bully and honk out a route. You are brushed and harried by busy office workers flying this way and that; ambling tourists circle like injured wildebeest, flapping half folded and crumpled maps; and all around people attempt to thrust unwanted pieces of paper into your hands.

The scene appears to be chaotic, incomprehensible and stressful. Where are all these people going? They seem disconnected and their movement seems to have no pattern. The noise is deafening, the fumes are choking and at best you are confused.

Yet just a matter of metres below the streets a simple

structure, the London Underground, creates an architecture of order; its stations provide entry and exit routes; and the trains themselves create the catalyst for movement from any one point to any other. A slight shift of the focus and chaos that is the street, takes on some degree of order; disconnection turns to connection; and confusion melts into opportunity.

All neighbourhoods are like this. Beyond the chaos, randomness and seeming lack of connection, there lies a structure just beneath the surface which, if connected together, would form an opportunity map, not unlike an underground map, with jumping off points and a multitude of connections. Here's what one might look like: -

Opportunity Map: Alderley Edge



An opportunity map is a simple thing. Anyone can do it on their own neighbourhood in not very much time at all. Using the underground format helps people to look for possible connections and to focus less on where things lie in absolute geographical space, concentrating more on defining a kind of opportunity space – a place where ideas; opportunities; activities; initiatives; partnerships; collaborations; and new connections can take hold and multiply.

Opportunity maps force you to re-adjust your focus so that things that may have previously been perceived as

problems now become opportunities, such as: -

- Empty shops or offices on the high street
- Car parks & laybys
- Places with a music licence which is not being used
- Hotels with low occupancy
- Buildings with facilities that could become dual use
- Open space that could be re-invented
- Established groups or clubs
- Informal groups

Opportunity maps like this can be a useful opening shot in exploring how Big Society could develop in your neighbourhood, because: -

- They are easy and quick to do
- It's a fun activity
- The moment you publish it you get interaction..."How could you omit X? Don't you understand about Y? This is wrong; I totally disagree with that"...and so it becomes richer, and more people become engaged with seeing opportunity
- It forces questions "So why, with all of this

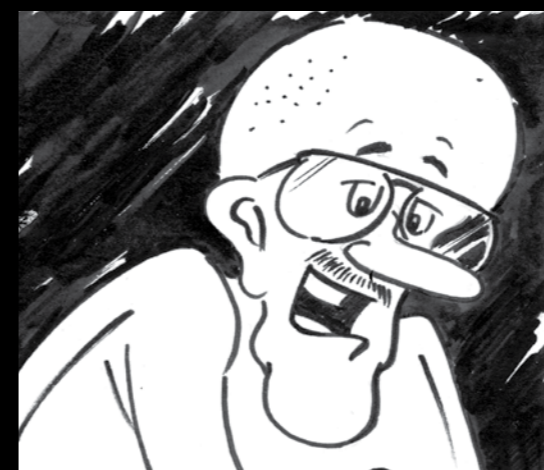
opportunity are we demonising our young people for just hanging out? What does that say about us?"

- In the world of starting out on creating your own Big Society...questions are the answer.

So with the opportunity map we have created the equivalent of underground 'stations'. Each one has the potential to offer a street view of chaos and disconnection...or the potential for an amazing adventure, depending on what you want to see and what questions you ask yourself.

But what good are stations alone? Don't we need some long metal tubes?

Case Study: The Sparkplug Guy



Chris Dabbs pounds the streets of Salford. He is looking for what he calls 'sparkplugs'. He is always interested in discovering ordinary people who have bright ideas and lots of energy – these are his sparkplugs – because they can help him to build his unusual business which has an unusual product. It trades in happiness.

He believes that local people can find local solutions and often are much more innovative than public sector organisations. Like the giant game of snakes and ladders they used to draw attention to the importance of cancer screening. A follow up study twelve months later has shown that the percentage of new cases diagnosed with 'no spread' has doubled to 25%. That means the chances of successful treatment are higher and the costs to the NHS are lower.

Or the health trainers he now employs who are all local people. Their approach to encouraging

people not to smoke indoors was to ask them to think about the impact of smoking on what they cared about – one smoker gave up when he realised what passive smoking was doing to his dog! Noticing that his dog was wheezing, he now walks his dog more as well, which does him no harm either.

Dabbs is the boss of Unlimited Potential. It finds innovative ways to help people to lead happier and healthy lives in situations where traditional public services have struggled to make an impact. It makes profits but ploughs them all back into its social mission – unleashing potential to make better places to live.

He says "There is something of an obsession with looking at needs and then bringing in professionals to try to meet them. We prefer to look at what assets there are in a neighbourhood. We find and support the sparkplugs that exist in every neighbourhood if only people can be bothered to look".

Dabbs is working on a new idea. He calculates that the local NHS budget to tackle problem drinking pans out at about £20 per person. On one estate the off-licences and pubs are turning over about £6 million. He says "Why don't we just take over the alcohol business on the estate and use the profits to tackle problem drinking? That way we could invest millions into trying to put ourselves out of business".

www.unlimitedpotential.org.uk

Case Study: The Irreverent Reverend



Andrew Mawson arrived in Bromley-by-Bow as a fresh-faced reverend taking on his first Parish. He found a church with a leaking roof, £400 in a bank account and a congregation of twelve people, all aged over 70. On the face of it the future didn't look too bright.

He became frustrated at what he saw as a voluntary and social sector having endless management meetings, spouting ideology and with endless talk about equal opportunity, whilst all around lay poverty and decay.

He says "There were people like Karen who lived in a tower block with three kids who would say 'well I don't want to join a committee, but what we really need around here is a decent nursery and a health facility'. I was hearing massive frustration from people and thought that maybe here was an opportunity".

He began to just say 'yes' and back people and their passions. He found the sculptor Santiago Bell, who had been imprisoned in Chile by the Pinochet regime, sharing a flat nearby. Santiago set up a studio in the church and began to produce amazing works from wood he found in skips. More people began to come to see what was happening. Janet, who had been a professional dancer set up a dance school in another corner of the church; Eve came and set up a nursery; then Sue created the Pie in the Sky café.

By now momentum was gathering and Gordon, the architect, came up with a plan to rip out the church and create a central canopy area, which

could be used by any faith, an art gallery and Britain's first integrated nursery.

When Jean, a local lady suffering from cancer died after being badly let down by the NHS, Mawson decided that if the NHS would not build them a health centre they would do it themselves. They did, using the same hand-made bricks that they have at Glyndebourne.

What grew out of a church with a leaking roof is today known as the Bromley-by-Bow Centre. It employs over 100 local people, has an income in excess of £2 million and includes the integrated health centre and a three acre park, providing over 125 activities every week. Several businesses have spun out of the centre.

Mawson says "Human beings, if they can connect in a certain way, can become amazingly powerful things. If you start from people and their passion you can get 120% commitment. Instead of building a theory of society as government tends to do we need to rebuild society around passion".

Today Mawson is using exactly the same principles to regenerate St Pauls Way, an area of East London adjacent to the Olympic Park. It will include a new £40 million school, a health centre, redeveloped housing and a new £1 million streetscape.

It all began with some simple ideas about backing people in a crumbling old church. The clues to the macro lie in the micro.

www.bbbc.org.uk
www.stpaulsway.org.uk

Passion can move mountains

We would hate to be accused of not milking a metaphor for all that it is worth...so here goes. Yes, in our Big Society in the making, we need lots of long metal tubes which will carry people along, helping them enjoy the experience whilst connecting them in whatever way they want.

The neighbourhood equivalents of tube trains are people with a passion. They say that passion can move mountains. Passions reflect our natural talents, and as we have already said, if we care to look, Britain has got immense talent in every neighbourhood.

The great thing about passions and talents is that they are often latent. Lying in wait for an outlet, yet a valuable asset in any community. Most people have a passion or a talent for something. Sometimes it is hard to seek it out but once unleashed it can be unstoppable...hey, we've all been to a karaoke.

So imagine now creating a passion map for your neighbourhood. Again, geographical space is irrelevant, it's simply a case of identifying passions and talents that you might be able to energise at some time in some way.

One could be forgiven for thinking that the idea of a passion map works well in more prosperous areas, but that is to underestimate the distribution of passion. It is free and springs from natural talent not from economic circumstance. There can be immense talent in some of the most challenging neighbourhoods. For instance some of Stoke-on-Trent's most deprived neighbourhoods contain talented artists and potters. The traditional view is that these people are 'redundant'. Using opportunity mapping and talent mapping, suddenly the same assets could be seen as valuable.

We simply have to change our focus.

My neighbourhood
passion map

Artist

Dancer

IT boffin

Personal trainer

Builder

Chef

Chutney making champion

Bicycle freak

Animate, an' i-mat. v.t.--animated, animating.
 [L. *animatus*, animated, pp of *animo*, I fill with
 breath. **ANIMAL**] To give natural life to; to quicken;
 to make alive, to give life, spirit, or liveliness to.
Animateur, he who breathes life into something so
 that what was still, now moves.
Animator, an' i-mat-er, n. One who animates.

The art of the animateur

Go to the neighbourhoods where there is evidence of Big Society in action. Places like Bromley-by-Bow in East London; pockets of Salford; Toxteth; and Benchill in Manchester. You will notice, if you look closely enough, what is happening in each of these places. Of course they look to turn problems into opportunities. Yes they encourage and tap into the talents of people. But there is something that catalyses action. It's like the electricity running through the underground. It makes movement happen.

We like to call this the art of the animateur – one who breathes life into something so that what was still now moves.

It is the presence of the animateur which creates momentum out of opportunity and passion. These are no ordinary people. They are enterprising, creative, curious, connectors who bring people together and negotiate obstacles in whatever form they may present themselves. They are social entrepreneurs not passive volunteers. They set high

aspirations about the future rather than holding onto a nostalgic view of the past.

They have been around doing brilliant work in pockets all over Britain for quite some time. They delve into the detail of people's everyday lives, gathering momentum, skill and passion around real issues rather than dealing in the rhetoric of referendums and structural reform. The clues to the macro lie in the micro. Big Society can grow out of dealing with the detail of people's everyday lives.

The animateur is the essential ingredient in all of this. We need to find, develop and support thousands more; give them the benefit of the lessons we have learned over a decade; give them the vocabulary of a vibrant future not one of a past that never really existed.

The Office of Big Society says it will recruit 5000 'community volunteers'. It sounds like a litter-picking club organised by the Home Guard. What we really need are highly skilled, immensely motivated local animateurs.

Isn't this rather simplistic?

Yes. It has to be. People have jobs, families and lives to lead. Most don't want to get trapped in unfathomable jargon and rhetoric, structural debates and referendums. They want a better life, they want to engage with things that they are passionate about, they want to have some fun.

This simple approach of mapping opportunity, finding passion and unleashing animateurs can be done by anyone. You don't have to wait for permission from the Council. It is not time consuming, it creates more

and more connections - and connections create opportunities. In time small actions become like a 'sticky ball' slowly gathering momentum, and as more things happen more people stick to it. As more people stick the momentum increases and small things can begin to make a big difference.

Big Society is a macro issue. The answers lie in the micro. The detail of people's everyday lives brought into focus by the art of the animateur.

Case Study: The Bouncer



Staring down the barrel of a sawn-off shotgun, Greg Davis decided that his life, if he was to continue to have one, had to change.

In the 80's he had built up a reputable door security business, but increasingly control of the doors meant control of the drugs, and Greg was finding himself in situations that made him carefully consider his future prospects.

He went back to his old neighbourhood Benchill, a neighbourhood which at times has reached the

heady heights of being Britain's No1 in the table of multiple deprivation. Shootings and stabbings are not uncommon.

He wanted to try to make a change so he bought the derelict church, not knowing what he was going to do with it. He recruited 'street leaders' to join a management team and together they have created a gym, a food distribution project, a hostel, recording and dance studios, and they have supported the growth of micro-businesses.

Davis says "Make no mistake, this is a very tough neighbourhood, but we have shown that if you really try, you can squeeze the goodness out of people. We try to reach what the council call 'hard to reach' people and get them into doing positive things". Despite this he has not had a penny of Council support in fifteen years.

They get lots of people coming to see what they have done. He says "Pre-election, David Cameron came here twice citing us as a leading example of Big Society and offering to be a Patron. He loved us, now he doesn't even answer our letters. We are saddened by this, but not deterred. We've been doing this for 15 years now, long before Big Society was a gleam in Mr Cameron's eye".

www.unitedstates.org.uk



bearhunt®

Why Bearhunt? If you are familiar with the children's book 'We're Going on a Bear Hunt' you'll know...

In it a family sets out to meet a bear, only to face a series of daunting obstacles: deep mud; a cold river; a dark forest; a violent storm. At each the family are united in their resolve – "We can't go under it; we can't go over it; we'll have to go through it". Life is like that. Whatever sector we are in we will have to live with increasing uncertainty of what lies ahead, knowing that retreat offers no alternative.

Bearhunt is about creating the spirit, the mindset, the curiosity, creativity, skills, knowledge and support that stops you from tinkering around at the edge of your obstacles – and helps you to smash through them. If the future is indeed both exciting and frightening, we have to be positive, we have to move forward... so let's go on a magnificent Bearhunt.

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