Enabling social action

SECTION A

A description of social action

Social action is about people coming together to help improve their lives and solve the problems that are important in their communities. It involves people giving their time and other resources for the common good, in a range of forms – from volunteering and community-owned services to community organising or simple neighbourly acts.

Whilst many of these activities occur without the support of the public sector (in which case the role of public servants is to ensure that the right conditions are in place for social action to thrive), some require more specific support from the public sector. This section introduces what social action is and explains how the public sector can grow it and harness its potential to improve outcomes.

In this section, you will find the following tools:

A1 Glossary of terms
A set of definitions for terms used frequently in relation to enabling social action

A2 Typology of social action
A visual description of the spectrum of activities that fall into the definition of social action with illustrative case studies

A3 Three ways to enable social action
A summary of the roles played by the public sector in supporting and facilitating social action

A1. Glossary of terms: Definitions of terms commonly used when enabling social action

ASSET-BASED APPROACHES

Asset-based approaches start with the positive resources and skills found in individuals and communities, rather than with needs, deficits, or problems.

For example, if a local authority or community group were to take an asset-based approach to improving health in its local area, it might decide to focus on strengthening the things that are already keeping people healthy – such as social networks or sporting activities – rather than targeting a specific local health problem – such as high rates of lung cancer – with a top-down intervention. This transforms the way people are perceived, so that they are seen not as passive recipients of services and burdens on the system, but as equal partners in designing and delivering services.

COMMISSIONING

Commissioning involves using all available resources to achieve outcomes for people, building on their needs, assets, and aspirations. It encompasses – but is distinct from – procurement.

The Office for Civil Society defines commissioning as deciding how to use the total resource available in order to improve citizen's outcomes in the most efficient, effective and sustainable way.[1]

COMMUNITY ORGANISING

An approach to community empowerment and development that focuses on one-to-one relationship building, community capacity and mobilising people-power to take action and address social inequality.

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1   Cabinet Office, Crown Commercial Service, and Efficiency and Reform Group. (2013). The Commissioning Academy. Retrieved from: www.gov.uk/guidance/the-commissioning-academy-information#what-is-commissioning

CO-PRODUCTION

Co-production is a relationship where professionals and citizens share power to design, plan, and deliver support together, recognising that both partners have vital contributions to make to improve quality of life for people and communities.[2]

INDICATORS

Indicators are ways of knowing that an outcome has been achieved, or show progress against an outcome. For example, indicators for an increase in confidence might include a young person trying new things, making new friends, or taking on new challenges. These are related behaviours that indicate an increase in confidence.

OUTCOMES

An outcome is the meaningful and valued change or effect that occurs because of a particular activity or set of activities. Outcomes may be achieved over a relatively short period, or they may be longer-term in nature. For example, if you are supporting people to find employment, a shorter-term outcome might be improving confidence, and the longer-term outcome might be getting, and ultimately staying in, a job. In these situations, it makes sense to talk about a person's distance travelled towards achieving their ultimate goal.

OUTPUTS

Outputs are a quantitative summary of an activity. For example, the number of youth work sessions delivered or the number of elderly people attending a luncheon club are outputs. An output tells you an activity has taken place, but it does not tell you what changes as a result.

PREVENTION

Prevention entails using all available public resources to prevent harm rather than coping with acute needs and problems that could have been avoided. There are three levels of prevention: downstream measures try to cope with the consequences of harm and focus on specific cases; midstream measures aim to mitigate the effects of harm that has already happened and focus on groups and other things considered at risk or

2   Definition of co-production developed by the National Co-Production Critical Friends, January 2013.

vulnerable; and upstream measures aim to prevent harm before it occurs and usually focus on whole populations and systems.

PROCUREMENT

Procurement is the legal and technical process of seeking bids and acquiring goods or services from an external source, such as a community organisation, charity, social enterprise, or business. It is just one way of achieving the outcomes sought in commissioning. When a good or service is put out to tender as part of the commissioning cycle, contracts are drawn up and the good or service is 'purchased'. Importantly, this is not exactly the same as spending money; it is about obtaining something – a good, a service, or an outcome.

SOCIAL ACTION

The Office for Civil Society defines social action as follows:

'Social action is about people coming together to help improve their lives and solve the problems that are important in their communities. It can broadly be defined as practical action in the service of others, which is (i) carried out by individuals or groups of people working together, (ii) not mandated and not for profit, (iii) done for the good of others – individuals, communities and/or society, and (iv) bringing about social change and or value.'[3]

WELLBEING

Wellbeing is about how people experience their lives and flourish. Wellbeing is most usefully thought of as the dynamic process that gives people a sense of how their lives are going, through the interaction between their circumstances, activities and psychological resources or 'mental capital'.

3   Cabinet Office. (2015). Social action: Harnessing the potential: A discussion paper. Retrieved from: www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-action-harnessing-the-potential
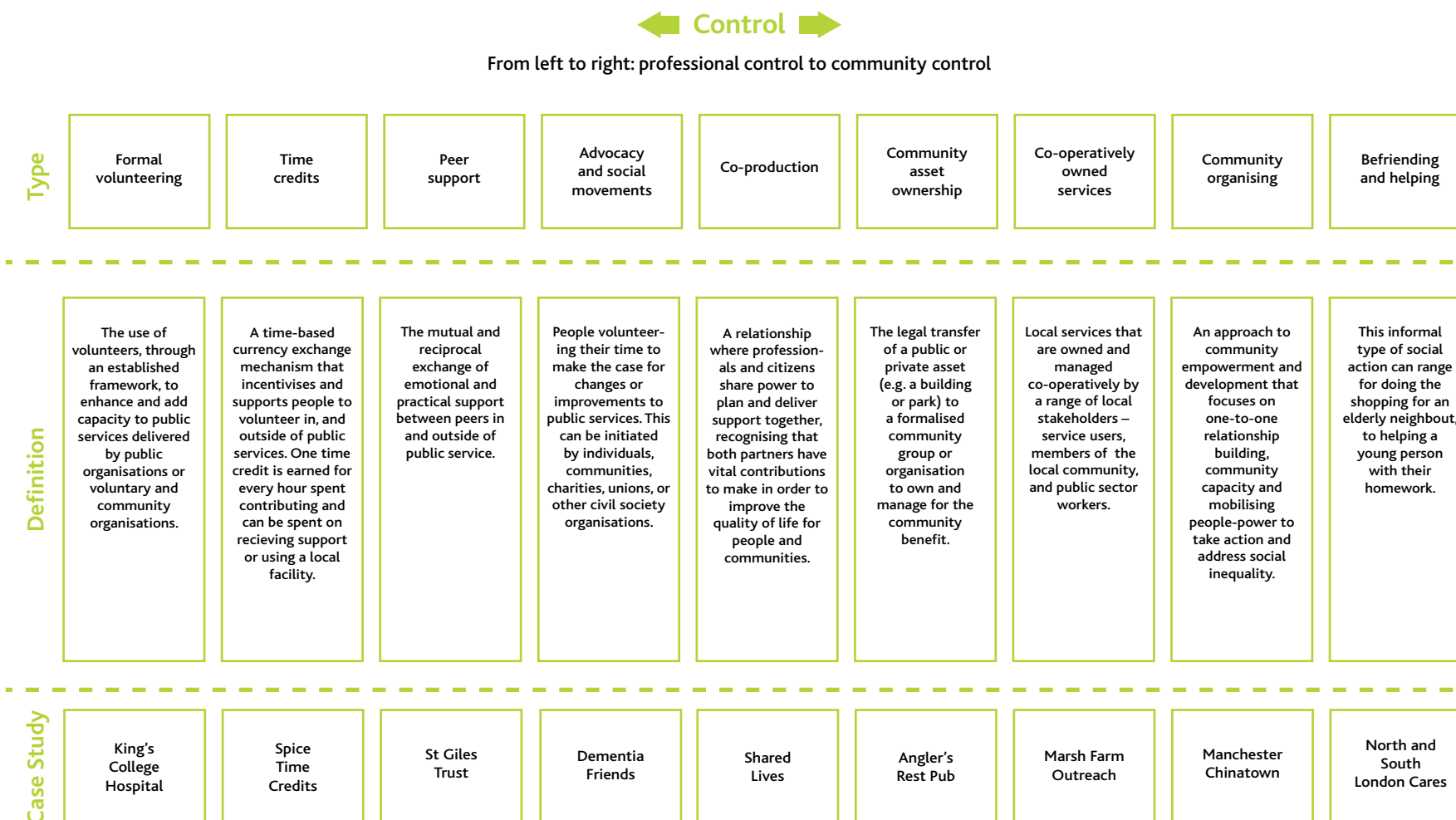
A2: Typology of social action

Social action is people coming together to tackle an issue, support other people, or improve their local area. It involves people giving their time and other resources for the common good, in a range of forms – from volunteering to community-owned services, and peer networks to community organising.

The typology of social action (Figure 1) is a visual description of the spectrum of activities that fall into the definition of social action, focusing particularly on people giving their time in a range of ways. From left to right, the spectrum moves from activities that involve significant input from professionals, such as voluntary sector or local authority staff, to activities which are wholly run by people in communities (whether local communities or communities of interest).

Activities towards the left of the spectrum may be commissioned directly, either through existing services or as a social action project. Activities towards the right require more focus on commissioning the conditions for social action. This might mean commissioning the training of local community organisers and ensuring that local spaces are accessible for groups that want to set up activities.

Figure 1. Typology of Social Action

← Control →

From left to right: professional control to community control

Type	Formal volunteering	Time credits	Peer support	Advocacy and social movements	Co-production	Community asset ownership	Co-operatively owned services	Community organising	Befriending and helping
Definition	The use of volunteers, through an established framework, to enhance and add capacity to public services delivered by public organisations or voluntary and community organisations.	A time-based currency exchange mechanism that incentivises and supports people to volunteer in, and outside of public services. One time credit is earned for every hour spent contributing and can be spent on recieving support or using a local facility.	The mutual and reciprocal exchange of emotional and practical support between peers in and outside of public service.	People volunteer-ing their time to make the case for changes or improvements to public services. This can be initiated by individuals, communities, charities, unions, or other civil society organisations.	A relationship where profession-als and citizens share power to plan and deliver support together, recognising that both partners have vital contributions to make in order to improve the quality of life for people and communities.	The legal transfer of a public or private asset (e.g. a building or park) to a formalised community group or organisation to own and manage for the community benefit.	Local services that are owned and managed co-operatively by a range of local stakeholders – service users, members of the local community, and public sector workers.	An approach to community empowerment and development that focuses on one-to-one relationship building, community capacity and mobilising people-power to take action and address social inequality.	This informal type of social action can range for doing the shopping for an elderly neighbout, to helping a young person with their homework.
Case Study	King's College Hospital	Spice Time Credits	St Giles Trust	Dementia Friends	Shared Lives	Angler's Rest Pub	Marsh Farm Outreach	Manchester Chinatown	North and South London Cares

CASE STUDIES: IN MORE DETAIL

Formal volunteering: King's College Hospital

In 2010, King's College Hospital changed the way it involves volunteers. It asked staff what they would like to do for patients, but do not have time to do. As a result, the hospital started deploying volunteers in more frontline roles – welcoming patients; guiding them around the hospital; providing comfort, support, and reassurance in wards; and sitting with people during operations. Volunteers also help with open days and collect data from surveys of patient experience. The hospital now has over 1,500 volunteers giving more than 250,000 volunteering hours a year. Volunteers tend to be attracted by the opportunity to 'give something back' and for some, to gain experience to help them progress onto a course or into a job. Evidence suggests the volunteers are making a positive impact. The hospital's data show that patients who have access to a volunteer are more likely to say they would recommend the service to family and friends.[4]

Time credits: Spice Time Credits

Spice is an organisation that pioneers Time Credits as a way of valuing the time people give as volunteers, peer supporters, mentors, and more. Everyone's time is valued equally: you give an hour and you get an hour's Time Credit, regardless of the activity you were involved in, or your perceived skills and status. Credits can be spent on receiving help from someone else for the same amount of time, or with one of Spice's partners on trips to the cinema, museum, or leisure centre. Spice support schools, children's centres, community centres, libraries, housing associations, and other services to use Time Credits. They find that people using Credits become more aware of their own skills and strengths, more socially connected and healthier, and more aware of the different services and support available to them. As one service working with Spice Time Credits explains: 'The concept has created

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4   Clarence, E. & Gabriel, M. (2014). People helping people. London: Nesta. Retrieved from: www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/people_helping_people_the_future_of_public_services_wv.pdf

a quiet storm; we have seen customers who previously had no structure start to engage with their support workers asking about Time Credits and telling us about their individual skills.' Over 19,000 people are now earning Time Credits in the UK, 81% of whom say they experienced an increase in their quality of life as a result.[5]

Peer support: St Giles Trust

The St Giles Trust 'Peer to the Future' programme in Leeds was designed to reduce the likelihood of prison leavers re-offending by meeting both their physical needs (including housing and access to health and benefits services) and emotional needs (such as positive support networks) as they make their transition back into the community. The programme provides a 10-week minimum support package to offenders beginning four weeks prior to their release. The support in prisons was delivered by peer advisors who were prisoners with more than three months left to serve of their sentence. This initial support focuses on benefit claims and help with substance misuse. Support continues following release when beneficiaries are met at the prison gate by a peer advisor in the community, who continues to help them settle back into society. The peer advisors are ex-offenders who are willing and able to provide support with re-integration. An evaluation found that the programme successfully supports clients to achieve positive outcomes in housing, education, employment, and training, and health and wellbeing. Only 14 out of 203 clients supported by the programme re-offended during the 13-month evaluation period, which is a lower re-offending rate than typical in that area.

5   Apteligen & Spice. (2015). Spice Time Credits: Impact: Summer 2015 findings. Retrieved from: www.justaddspice.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Apteligen-Spice-Report-2015-Screen-Read.pdf

Advocacy and social movements: Dementia Friends

Dementia Friends, launched in February 2013 by the Alzheimer's Society, is a social movement that is changing how society helps people with dementia. One in three people over the age of 65 will develop dementia and it costs the economy £26 billion a year. The movement has created 1.5 million Dementia Friends: people with some understanding of dementia and the small things they can do to help people.

Volunteers become a Dementia Friend through a 45-minute face-to-face training session or by completing a 10 minute online session – both of which are free. High-profile businesses backed the initiative, with Marks & Spencer creating 80,000 Dementia Friends among its staff.[6] At the end of training sessions, new Friends are encouraged to consider several ways in which they can lend support through social action, from making efforts to visit a friend or relative living with dementia, to committing to volunteering.

Co-production: Shared Lives

Shared Lives offers an alternative approach for people who need support. Carers trained by Shared Lives share their own homes and family lives with adults with learning disabilities and other kinds of care needs (such as a physical impairment or mental health issue) after a careful matching process. Shared Lives carers provide a mix of paid and unpaid care: they are self-employed and receive payment from the local authority to recognise the statutory role they play in providing personal care for which they are trained to professional standards. They also receive a contribution towards rent. Beyond that, much of the support is given voluntarily: the informal support carers provide is not remunerated as it is primarily about welcoming people into family life.

In England in 2014/2015, 11,570 people were supported in Shared Lives arrangements by 8,460 Shared Lives carers through a combination of permanent living arrangements, short breaks, and day support. In 2016, the vast majority of Shared Lives placements were rated 'outstanding'

6   Cabinet Office. (2015). Social action: Harnessing the potential: A discussion paper. Retrieved from: www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-action-harnessing-the-potential

or 'good' by the Care Quality Commission – 96% compared to 68.6% of community services and 63.5% of residential services. No Shared Lives placement was considered inadequate. Shared Lives aims to grow rapidly over the next four years to support 37,113 more people and save local authorities an additional £145 million annually.[7]

Community asset ownership: Angler's Rest pub

The Angler's Rest at Bamford, Derbyshire, was the last pub in the village and was listed as an asset of community value (ACV). When it was put on the market, the ACV triggered a month's moratorium period, under the Community Right to Bid. The community raised the £270,000 necessary to purchase the pub within a month. They received advice from the Plunkett Foundation and funding from 'Pub is the Hub' to facilitate the relocation of the village post office to the pub and the opening of a café within the building. The Angler's Rest is now a thriving community hub.

Co-operatively owned services: Marsh Farm Outreach

Marsh Farm Outreach (MFO) is a collective of residents who have been active on the Marsh Farm estate in Luton, Bedfordshire, for many years. They are part of a concerted community effort to gain greater local control by promoting inclusive economic development and regeneration practices. They develop community-led and community-owned businesses to improve the local economy, reduce unemployment in the estate, and ensure that the benefits of the activities are returned directly to local people. For example, MFO set up its own construction firm of local builders to tender for larger contracts in a government regeneration programme. They redeveloped one of Luton's oldest farmhouses as 'Marsh Farm HQ', with plans for a family visitors centre with a 'hands on' history room, a music studio, a café

7   Shared Lives Plus. (2016). The State of Shared Lives in England. Retrieved from: sharedlivesplus.org.uk/images/1Launch_copy_Final_The_State_of__Shared_Lives_in_England_-_2016.pdf

restaurant, office space, a DJ mixing academy, a horse riding paddock, a BMX track, and office space for newly forming co-operative businesses.

In 2015, it launched 'The Organisation Workshop', a project designed to support unemployed people to self-generate and sustain a wave of new jobs by creating seven new not-for-profit social enterprises based on the estate. Of the 45 people involved, all had been unemployed for at least three years and many had experienced multiple disadvantages. Participants organised themselves into small businesses offering a range of services including landscaping and gardening, building and construction, organic farming, and catering. They have delivered contracts including the construction of a wooden roundhouse using traditional building methods and sustainable materials, and cultivating a large area with poly-tunnels for food-growing and over 100 fruit trees.[8]

Community organising: Manchester Chinatown

People living in Manchester's Chinatown started to organise themselves, with the support of a community organiser. One of the first projects was setting up a Councillor Question & Answer for the Chinese community and especially non-English speakers to engage with local and national decision-making. City Centre Councillors came to Chinatown to meet the community half way, physically and symbolically. This helped to shift power towards residents. For the first time, the Chinese residents had a chance to meet their local political representatives, and it was such a success that the meetings have become a regular fixture.

8   Marsh Farm Outreach. (no date). Projects. Retrieved from: www.marshfarmoutreach.org.uk/projects

Befriending and helping: North and South London Cares

North London Cares and South London Cares are sister community networks of young professionals and older neighbours offering one another a little extra time, practical help, social connection, and companionship. The work aims to tackle the growing problem of isolation and loneliness, to help improve the confidence, resilience, skills, and connections of all participants so that old and young can better navigate a rapidly changing modern world, and to bring people together across long-standing social and generational divides.

The networks aim to make it simple, quick, and hassle-free for young professionals to get to know their older neighbours to facilitate 'a resurgence of neighbourliness' in boroughs across London. This is achieved through themed social events (such as film nights, cooking classes, and dances) and a 'love your neighbour' project which helps create new one-to-one relationships between young professionals and older neighbours. Currently, these networks reach 28,000 older people through 3,300 volunteers giving a total of 26,000 hours of their voluntary time.[9]

9   Nesta. 2016. People Helping People: Lessons learned from three years supporting social action innovation to scale. Retrieved from: www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/people_helping_people_lessons_learnt.pdf

A3: Three ways to enable social action

There are three main ways in which the public sector can enable social action. Public bodies seeking to enable a range of activities across the typology of social action are likely to be involved in all three.

	Definition	Examples	Levers	Pros and cons
1. As part of existing services	Incorporating elements of social action into existing programmes and services.	• A service is recommissioned with a peer-support element • Volunteers are recruited as part of the co-design and delivery of an in-house service • Social workers support residents to access a local time credits network	• Commissioning • Citizen engagement in service design • Volunteer training and recruitment service • Training and support for frontline staff on the role and benefits of social action	**Pro:** Embeds the principles of social action at the heart of public services, including potentially large contracts for core services. **Con:** Works around existing services and may reduce scope for citizens to shape design and delivery.
2. Through new projects	Setting up new activities, projects, or services to fill a gap, replace an existing service, or complement existing services.	• A small grants programme is set up to seed-fund social action that helps older and disabled people maintain their independence • A youth leadership programme is commissioned through a joint panel of young people and commissioners • A partnership of public and third sector organisations making community grants is created to pool funding to support social action programmes that reduce isolation and loneliness	• Commissioning • Strategic partnerships (e.g. Health and Wellbeing Boards) • Challenge prizes	**Pro:** Able to fill gaps in existing provision. **Con:** Can lead to short-termism; one-off projects without plans for how they will be sustained.

| 3. By creating the right conditions | Supporting the conditions necessary for social action to flourish outside of, or beyond, the public sector's control. | • A website is set up where people can promote local activities, request help from the community, and offer to contribute their time or expertise to help someone else

• Barriers to using community spaces such as cost and availability are removed

• Support is offered to residents who want to mobilise to address a local issue such as litter collection or refugee welcome

• Concerted efforts are made to reduce inequalities which make it harder for some groups to participate than others | • Community organising

• VCSE capacity building

• Physical assets such as community centres, Jobcentres, schools, and libraries

• Vacant properties converted into spaces for community projects and cooperative workspace ('Meanwhile spaces')

• Equality Impact Assessments used to identify inequalities

• Influencing the public sector and local businesses (e.g. Employer Supported Volunteering, whereby employers agree to give staff paid leave to volunteer)

• Incentivising people to take part in social action by setting up time credits systems, volunteering awards, and promoting youth social action | **Pro:** Potential to lead to long-term forms of social action which originate from civil society itself.

Con: Public sector cannot define or prescribe the outcomes to be aimed for or achieved as this is left up to residents. |

Part of Enabling social action – tools and resources developed by the New Economics Foundation in collaboration with the Office for Civil Society. Available from **www.gov.uk**