



Final Report: Big Data and the Third Sector

Main objectives and context

The third sector has seen dramatic growth since the mid-1990s (NCVO, 2012). Public service reform has led to increasing provision of public services by third sector organisations, and increased involvement of communities in organising and delivering services through volunteering and informal participation (National Audit Office, 2005; Public Administration Select Committee, 2008). The third sector plays a vital role in both the governance and delivery of welfare, particularly in times of austerity. This leads to two challenges for policy makers: i) understanding the make-up and distribution of the third sector to inform policy; and ii) ensuring that third sector organisations have access to the necessary data on service demand and need to inform the design and delivery of services.

The overall aims of the workshop series were to look at how third sector organisations can make better use of data strategically and operationally, to see what data can reveal about the third sector, and to develop the capacity and capability of third sector organisations to work with data. The specific aims and objectives of the programme were:

- To explore how the scale and characteristics of the Scottish third sector are currently measured and understood, and how this could be further developed;
- To develop awareness of the ways in which data can help inform how third sector organisations deliver services, including public services;
- To identify and showcase examples of best practice in making use of data by third sector organisations;
- To identify and explore the challenges faced by third sector organisations in engaging with data;
- To identify and explore potential solutions to those challenges;
- To build a network of academics, policy makers and practitioners that can help take forward some of the solutions.

Insights resulting from the programme

The programme consisted of three workshops:

- Workshop One: Using data to better understand the scale and scope of the Scottish third sector
- Workshop Two: How can the Scottish third sector make best use of Open and Big Data?
- Workshop Three: How can we develop the capacity of third sector organisations to engage with data?



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The three workshops brought together around 40 people - among them academics, students, and practitioners from the third sector, the public sector, and the private sector – for information sharing, networking, and lively debates.

Keynote speakers included Professor Lester Salamon from the USA who showed how data can ‘smash through some of the great myths of global civil society’ and Gavin Starks, of the Open Data Institute, who talked about data heralding ‘a new era in which people can use open data to create a better world for all’. Volunteer Development Scotland revealed ‘how data visualisation can tell a story’ while Madeleine Thornton from Buttle talked about ‘digging deep with big and awkward data’ so as to develop more targeted service provision.

A series of café conversations engaged with topics ranging from how to evaluate the quality of someone else’s data, to developing trust in data sharing collaborations, to questions about who owns the data that third sector organisations collect about their service users, and what can be done to keep data secure. There were lots of real and practical examples throughout the series of the ways that third sector organisations are accessing and using data and how it is informing their strategy, their day-to-day operations, and their overall effectiveness. Reports and other materials from the workshops are freely available at <www.thinkdata.org.uk>.

Main outcomes and (expected) impact

There was clearly a thirst among participants for this type of event and for further capacity and capability-building initiatives. Participants commented on the events leaving them with a better understanding of what their organisations could do with data. Some felt they would be more confident about using data now. The overall view was that while the workshops had given participants more awareness of the opportunities that data opens up for the third sector and third sector organisations, the series had also highlighted important challenges and issues to be addressed as well.

Feedback from participants:

What will you take away from our first workshop?

‘A picture of the third sector at international level’

‘Knowledge of big data and the importance of good quality stats, plus some useful contacts’

‘The variety of uses and need for third sector data’

‘A more confident approach to data analysis’

‘Contacts, data sources and perspectives!’



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What would you like to see from a Scottish Network for third sector data?

‘Open to small community-based organisations’

‘Sharing examples of what third sector organisations are doing with data’

‘A forum for sharing learning experiences’

‘More input from the private sector’

‘Link webinars with a discussion network’

The programme was successful in building up a mixed community of academics and practitioners interested in third sector data. It supported the organising team in collaborating on an ESRC funding application. It will provide the foundation for engaging closely with third sector organisations in our further work in this area.

Planned follow up activities

Funding of £250,000 has been secured under the Economic and Social Research Council’s Civil Society Data Partnership programme that will enable the capacity and capability-building to be scaled-up and further developed in Scotland’s Third Sector. The 18 month roll-out, which will be led out of Stirling University in collaboration with St Andrews University and the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, will begin in July of this year. Information about the work that we will be doing, and about how third sector organisations and their staff and volunteers can participate in webinars and other events, will be posted on www.thinkdata.org.uk as the programme is taken forward.

We also have plans to continue to produce content for the ThinkData website, taking on board the suggestions and offers made by workshop participants, and will be developing these ideas over the summer.

Key recommendations for end user / policy communities

Both the speakers and the participants identified the potential benefits for third sector organisations of making better use of both internal and external data. While this is not without challenges, there are a series of investments by government, research councils and funding bodies to develop capacity in this area, of which our Civil Society Data Partnership starting in July is just one. Organisations should make use of this support in order to take advantage of these opportunities.