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## Introduction

This paper explores how austerity has impacted on the ability of voluntary and community sector organisations in England to represent, advocate and lobby to ensure that the voice of disadvantaged people is heard by government. Much recent third sector commentary provides a sense that the voice of the voluntary sector, and in particular those organisations seeking government funding to deliver welfare services, has been diminished and that the sector faces a stark future (Cook 2015). The stock of the voluntary sector appears to be low following numerous damaging scandals over fundraising practices, data mishandling, 'political lobbying', charitable tax relief, excessive executive pay and poor governance, management and accounting practices (Daily Mail 2015, Parliament UK 2014, Ward 2015, Kay 2015). The Charity Commission's research on public trust in charities has shown a significant fall in overall trust compared to previous surveys (Charity Commission 2016). It has also been suggested that legal and regulatory changes have contributed to a climate of fear around campaigning and lobbying (Meade 2015, Morris 2015).

There has been much international interest in the changing role of voluntary organisations in welfare delivery, their ability to speak out for disadvantaged people and how this has been affected by the global financial crisis from 2008. Research shows variation in voluntary sector voice internationally (Chaves *et al* 2004, Salamon *et al* 2008, Silverman and Patterson 2011, Schmid *et al* 2008, Neumayr *et al* 2014), and heightened tensions between civil society, state regulatory and commercialising tendencies following recession (Evers and Laville 2004, Anheier 2014, 2015, Evans and Shields 2014, Butcher and Dalton 2014, Laforest 2013, Acheson and Laforest 2012). For example, Laforest (2013) note that, though different countries have followed different paths, they have faced tough decisions in response to global shifts in policy agendas and fiscal deficits which lead to greater complexity in organisational forms, regulatory and funding arrangements which may affect the ability to express critical voice.

This paper is focused on research in English voluntary sector organisations and recognises the problem of generalising internationally, including within the nations forming the UK (Chaney and Wincott 2014). However, globalisation from the 1980s has tended to polarise rich and poor both within and between nations bringing concerns at a general deterioration in welfare and citizen voice (Taylor 2011 a p. 11-13). Increasing attention has been focused on the tensions around recession and welfare restructuring which are seen to have led to a loss of trust between government and citizens (Anheier 2015 p. 1). At the same time concepts such as civil society, social capital, networks, empowerment and participation have become part of a global mainstream public policy discourse which offers a counterpoint to negative globalising trends (Taylor 2011 a). This places increasing expectations on the voluntary sector to check what Crouch (2011 p.168-169) sees as unaccountable corporate power. Voluntary organisations are expected to tackle 'the social exclusion that disfigures the progress of globalisation' at the same time as the global financial crisis and austerity impacts on them directly 'with public investment in community programmes and services to disadvantaged people particularly at risk' (Taylor 2011 a p. 17 and p.xi).

The paper will examine the following research questions:

- Has austerity changed the relationship between the state and voluntary sector and the ability of the voluntary sector to provide voice for the disadvantaged?

- Have the strategies that voluntary organisations pursue to influence the state and empower communities been constrained with austerity?
- How successful have alternative social models that the voluntary sector has pursued been?

This paper adds to the debate on voluntary sector voice through a longitudinal research methodology exploring the changing perceptions of CEOs and senior managers involved in the English voluntary sector over the last decade. This type of study may be of particular relevance to researching the voluntary sector giving temporal depth to the analysis of the complex role of the sector in a continuously changing social context.

The paper will, first, examine the changing role of the voluntary sector in welfare provision and providing voice for disadvantaged people. It will, second, examine the changing context and role of the voluntary sector in the UK. The third section discusses the qualitative longitudinal method while the fourth section presents the research findings. These track, through the perceptions and experience of voluntary sector chief executives and other key actors, changes in voluntary sector campaigning and influence on public welfare policy. The paper concludes with an analytical discussion which takes a longitudinal view of how austerity has affected voluntary sector voice and influence over welfare policy.

In summary the paper supports neo-institutional and resource dependency theories that austerity, institutional incorporation and managerial isomorphism have impacted negatively on the ability of the voluntary sector to express critical voice. This challenges empirical quantitative, largely US, research, that government and funding dependency strengthens rather than reduces political advocacy. This paper argues the need for a nuanced view of political advocacy that takes account of asymmetrical power relationships. Despite a climate of fear and the lack of critical voice, especially in larger organisations, there is optimism in alternative and innovative approaches, especially in smaller organisations. However, these lack the ability currently to empower disadvantaged people and communities, express critical voice and counter the negative trends accelerated by austerity.

### **Theoretical Framework: The restructuring of welfare and voluntary sector voice**

This paper adopts a critical perspective which recognises the unequal power relations which constrain the ability of voluntary organisations to provide voice for disadvantage people in a period of continued austerity. While optimists view the restructuring of welfare as an opportunity which opens up space to empower communities, pessimists continue to question whether it is a cost-cutting exercise intended to crush resistance, legitimise adjustments in favour of dominant power interests and dump welfare responsibility on to disadvantaged communities. This paper is closer to the pessimistic view of the constraints on voice with austerity but also recognises that power is not predetermined and policy making is a complex and contested process which can lead to new discourses, understandings and positive change (Taylor 2011 a p.18-21).

International literature on the restructuring of state welfare has moved beyond the 'hollowing out' of the state to examine the increasingly complex, intermediate and changing role of the voluntary sector in occupying the contested space between civil society, the state and the market (Rhodes 1994, Evers and Laville 2004). The voluntary sector can be seen to negotiate the 'tension between the tendency to treat the third sector as an alternative to state based services and its importance as an expression of civil society' and 'the increasing tendency to turn human services into commodities'

(Evers and Laville 2004 p.22 and 38). There have been concerns that the financial crisis from 2008 has led to a 'hollowing out' of democracy and loss of citizen voice and the challenge for voluntary sector organisations is to successfully bring together 'social mission, public legitimacy and financial stability' (Anheier 2015, Anheier and Krlev 2015 p. 197).

Neoliberalism and New Public Management (NPM) since the 1980s has changed management practices across the public and voluntary sector extending markets, contracting and commissioning to reduce the cost of public services (Newman 2000). It has been claimed that the creation of a formal voluntary sector has encouraged 'politically acceptable 'market-like' hybrid arrangements' which embed vertical government and managerial power, cutting across independent voluntary action and campaigns for improved public welfare services (Kendall 2003 p. 54, Rochester 2013). This can be illustrated through the shift from grant aid to contracting to commissioning where 'government decides exactly what kinds of services it wants, how much it is prepared to pay, what outcomes it expects and how the services are to be delivered' (Rochester 2013 p. 78). Despite the longevity of NPM there is little hard evidence that it has improved service outcomes while voluntary organisations have become increasingly vulnerable to mission drift, changes in government priorities or governmental change (Cunningham and James 2011). Critics also point to evidence of increasingly intrusive and overbearing regulation, bureaucracy when dealing with the state, professionalised leadership and the encroachment of market norms into civil society which reduces the ability of the voluntary sector to represent disadvantaged people (Mullins and Jones 2015, Bode and Bransden 2014 p. 1060).

More optimistic perspectives claim NPM has been transformed with New Public Governance (NPG). It is asserted that there has been a shift from government and bureaucratic forms of management to 'co-governance' marked by collaborative power sharing which enhances the voice of voluntary sector organisations in influencing public policy and projecting citizen and community voice (Evans and Shields 2014, Taylor 2011 a p.139-40). Critical theorists, drawing on Foucauldian governmentality theory, dispute this arguing that NPG fails to address issues of power, agency and accountability (Milbourne and Cushman 2015 p. 470, Dean 2014 p.17). Government, it is argued, legitimises prescribed forms of conduct, shifting power to corporate contractors, reshaping ideological discourses and organisational culture and practices, silencing dissenting voices, and reducing autonomy (Milbourne and Cushman 2015 p. 471, Taylor 2011 a p. 140). While NPG may be an ideal, the reality may be that NPM 'is anything but dead in practice' (Bode and Bransden 2014 p. 1060).

Neo-institutional and resource dependency theories argue that institutional incorporation impacts on independence, autonomy and voice. Fear of punishment and negative consequences from political activity, such as the withdrawal of state funding or loss of access to political power and influence, can be linked to abstinence from criticism to protect sources of income and secure organisational survival (Whelan 1999 p. 20, Milbourne 2013 p.195). Isomorphic pressures, it is argued, cause mission drift, loss of 'prophetic voice' and professionalization which leads to conformity and compliance. This 'limits alternative practices and aspirations and slowly transforms self-definition', which, in the longer term, decouples voluntary organisations from their civil society origins (Wolch 1990, Chaves *et al* 2004, DiMaggio and Powell 1983, Milbourne and Cushman 2015 p. 467, Taylor 2011 a p.117).

Empirical evidence into the impact of institutionalisation and financial dependency on political advocacy and lobbying is limited and inconclusive. Chaves *et al* (2004) concluded that state funding in the US had a positive impact on political advocacy and lobbying. They challenge neo-institutional, resource dependency perspectives concluding that 'nonprofit executives and board members . . . believe that accepting government funding legally restricts their political activity more than it actually does' (Chaves *et al* 2004 p. 297). They argue that the mutual interdependence between government and nonprofits leads to greater advocacy and lobbying by organisations in pursuit of public funding. However, though they reach a firm conclusion their statistical method ignores the effectiveness of political activity, its content, extent or the nuanced nature of power in political relationships (Chaves *et al* 2004 p. 312). Also, diversity in the sector means their conclusions may not be relevant to all nonprofit organisations in the US, and may be less relevant to voluntary organisations in other countries, which inhabit a significantly different political, financial, social and legal context. Their research was also conducted prior to the financial crisis, so cannot take account of its impact.

Other US research supports the view that advocacy and lobbying has not declined due to incorporation and fear of funding withdrawal (Salamon *et al* 2008 p.17). However, Salamon, Geller and Lorentz (2008 p.17) argue for a more nuanced approach which takes account of smaller grassroots organisations, advocacy for disadvantaged groups and communities, and changes occurring over time. They point to the limited extent of advocacy and lobbying, due to the lack of resources, skill and commitment, as organisations focus on the struggle to survive (Salamon *et al* 2008 p. 8). They point to reduced grassroots involvement in advocacy, which remains the preserve of larger organisation CEOs and is targeted on institutional issues rather than providing voice to disadvantaged people. They cite organisations continuing 'concerns about the potential loss of public funds' due to engagement in political advocacy and a shift to reliance on wealthy donors, foundations, coalitions and specialised intermediaries, which supports institutionalisation, conformity and a market mindset (Salamon *et al* 2008 p. 17).

Silverman and Patterson's 2011 study, following the financial crisis, also argues fears of punishment or legal restriction are overstated but highlights the impact of declining public funding on nonprofit advocacy and lobbying. Pressures for organisational survival, it is claimed, lead to increased regulatory compliance, competition for declining resources, goal displacement, mission drift and limits on the time available for advocacy and lobbying. They point to the emergence of a "nonprofit industrial complex" which emphasises 'the role of nonprofits as service providers, while discouraging advocacy work and political activism' (Silverman and Patterson p.438). This, it is argued, runs the risk of nonprofits being reduced to 'a contingent force of subcontractors for funders in the public, private and non-profit sectors' (Silverman and Patterson p. 447-9).

The impact of public funding on advocacy, it is argued, is difficult to measure which means 'empirical findings are strikingly inconsistent' (Neumayr *et al* 2014 p.1). Neumayr *et al* (2014 p. 11) support Chaves *et al* (2004), in that there is no significant relationship between public funding and a negative impact on political advocacy, for while 'NPOs engaging in undesired advocacy activities are still in danger of losing public services contracts and public support . . . dependence of government on nonprofits as service providers outweighs NPOs dependence on public funds' (p.11). However, Schmid *et al* (2008), in their research in Israel, counter this citing a significant correlation between volunteer and grassroots activity in raising political advocacy for disadvantaged people and a lower

level of advocacy and political activity the more dependent an organisation is on public funding. Institutional and financial dependency, they state, promotes 'services mandated by the law and in accordance with government policy' (Schmid *et al* 2008 p.584).

It can be questioned whether the findings from US studies are applicable to European countries and at all times. Neumayr *et al* (2014) call for more widespread research, which highlights the different contexts in different countries, and longitudinal studies, which highlight changes in advocacy over time. There are significant differences between the US and other countries, especially in regard to formal legal restrictions on political activity and attitudes to political activity aimed at promoting the rights of marginalised and disadvantaged people, which can be construed as opposing government policy producing moderation in political advocacy. Schmid *et al* (2008) cite how government cuts in social services limits the effectiveness of voluntary organisations in securing funding for the benefit of disadvantaged people, while advocacy coalitions undermine grassroots participation in tackling social problems.

There have been repeated warnings in the UK at the undervaluing of independent voice and compliance of mainstream voluntary sector and umbrella organisations, such as Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS), and traditional voluntary sector representative bodies, such as the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) and the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) (Baring Foundation 2014, NCIA 2015, Rochester 2013). However, while institutional theorists argue there has been a loss of voluntary sector voice the argument that voluntary sector organisations are always incorporated if they seek 'insider' influence may be exaggerated. Craig *et al* (2004) and McGhee and Bennett (2016) suggest that voluntary organisations adopt complex and nuanced 'insider' and 'outsider' approaches to campaigning and influencing government. Achieving positive change may depend on 'sustained dialogue' as 'not all local elites and power relations are exclusive and subordinate' and 'being on the outside is not always the best place to be' (Taylor 2011 a p. 247, 226 and p. 262, Acheson and Milofsky 2010). However, critics, again drawing on Foucauldian ideas of dissidence or counter-conduct, argue that there is a need to reclaim 'outsider' associational roots to counter the drift to a managerial and business mentality (Rochester 2013, NCIA 2015, Dean 2014 p.21).

Since 2008 political elites in the UK have promoted 'a deeper agenda of widespread cuts in welfare provision for vulnerable people' (Hermann 2014 p. 127, Chaney and Wincott 2014, Cunningham 2012). Restrictions to welfare, though, also open the potential for voluntary organisations to mobilise around dissent, reshape community action and reassert their agendas (Milbourne and Cushman 2015). In response to austerity there has been an increased focus on voluntary action, community organising and community unionism. However, while community organising potentially offers a voice for disadvantaged people and communities this is not unproblematic and there are problems building social movements, developing effective coalitions and overcoming tensions and divisions within broad social movements (Rochester 2013, Taylor 2011 b, McBride and Greenwood 2009, Holgate 2013 p. 22).

### **Context: The changing intermediate role of the voluntary sector in England**

This section examines the changing context and role of the voluntary sector in England. The introduction of a post-war universal welfare state marginalised voluntary provision but the sector had a continuing role in campaigning for and lobbying for the welfare state to fully address need and

respond flexibly to meet new needs (Davis Smith *et al* 1995). The 1960s brought a period of enhanced campaigning and political radicalism linked to civil rights and militant grassroots movements. However, by the late 1970s the voluntary sector was more formally integrated in a role that 'complements, supplements, extends and influences the informal and statutory systems' (Wolfenden 1978 p. 26).

Neoliberalism and NPM from the 1980s broke the uneasy ideological consensus supporting state welfare leading to change across the public and voluntary sector (King 1991, Newman 2000). The voluntary sector was encouraged to compete for contracts to provide public services which allowed growth but also provided the ability to continue to campaign and lobby for improved public welfare services (Kendall 2003 p.54). New Labour in 1997 mainstreamed the Third Sector institutionalising and extending its role as a partner in public policy and welfare provision, provided this was accompanied by modernisation around an essentially private sector model of good practice in public service delivery (Kendall 2000, Bach 2002).

The Big Society agenda of the Coalition government from 2010 sought to enhance the voice of civil society in contrast to the Big State approach it was argued the previous government had adopted. However, financial crisis, austerity and deficit reduction challenged the Big Society claims with critics arguing it was 'ultimately more about controlling expenditures than building an infrastructure for social initiatives and local empowerment' (Anheier 2014 p.450). Austerity, it was argued, provided an opportunity for the state to withdraw from welfare delivery with 'sizeable reductions in the workforce, changes in pay and conditions and in service closures' (Bach 2012 p. 402).

Voluntary sector growth from the 1980s has stalled and resources have diminished 'with some local government areas admitting reduced funding to VSOs of some 60-80%' (Milbourne 2013 p.151). Austerity has had a severe impact on the voluntary sector increasing demand for services while since 2009/10 the sector has faced a £2.3bn fall in income from government contracts and grants (NCVO 2015). Cuts have also been uneven geographically with many local authorities forced to cut their budgets significantly. The City of York, for example, has made cuts of £11.9 million from their budget between 2015 and 2016, on top of previous cuts, which has had documented impact on both local authority and voluntary organisation welfare services (York City Council/York CVS/University of York 2015). How, then, has a context of austerity affected the ability of voluntary organisations to campaign and advocate for policy change on behalf of service users. The next section describes the research approach taken in order to address this question.

### **Methodology: Qualitative Longitudinal Research**

This paper is based on qualitative research conducted in 2005–06 with voluntary and other organisations involved in the delivery of public welfare services. This included interviews with employees in 22 organisations, including 8 interviews with CEOs and senior managers from case study organisations. The research covered diverse services and geographic regions and provided data on the perceptions and attitudes of respondents to modernisation and its impacts on voluntary sector management, employment practices and service delivery (XXX 2013, reference removed to preserve author anonymity).

The research from 2005-6 was extended with new research conducted in 2014-15. This included repeat interviews with 5 of the 8 CEOs or Senior Managers, and an interview with one of the 3 trade

union national organisers, that took part in the original study. 3 of the 8 senior managers, and a CVS chair, could not be contacted and additional interviews were included to cover this loss. These were chosen opportunistically, based on geographical location and their relevance to the study. The 2005-6 research involved a cross-sectional design but the 2014-15 repeat interviews provided the opportunity to introduce a longitudinal element to examine changes in attitudes and perceptions of the CEOs and senior managers over the intervening decade, taking account of the financial crisis, political change and austerity. The table below gives detail on the research sample.

<b>T1: 2006-06 Interviews</b>	<b>T2: 2014-15 Interviews</b>
<b>54: INTERVIEWS</b>	<b>6: REPEAT Interviews</b>
<b>CEO/Senior managers: 8</b>	<b>CEO/Senior Managers: 5</b>
1. CEO, Radical Housing Trust  2. Regional Director, Parents Drug and Alcohol Service  3. CEO, Cuddle Co-ops  4. Regional Director, Philanthropy Housing Trust  5. Chief Officer, Reformed Housing Trust	1. CEO, Radical Housing Trust  2. Regional Director, Parents Drug and Alcohol Service  3. CEO, Cuddle Co-ops  4. MD, Lakeside Housing Trust (formerly Regional Director, Philanthropy Housing Trust)  5. Policy Officer, Northern Council (formerly Chief Officer, Reformed Housing Trust)
<b>3: LOST REPRESENTATIVES</b>  <i>6. Co-ordinator, Churchgate projects – did not respond – replaced with Church of England Representative</i>  <i>7. Chief Executive, Support in the Community – left post and could not be contacted</i>  <i>8. Senior Minister, Muddy Ditch Baptist Church – not contacted – replaced with Church of England Representative</i>  <i>9. Chair, Midlands City Council of Voluntary Services (CVS)</i>	<b>2: ADDITIONAL INTERVIEWS</b>  <i>6. CEO, Northern City Council for Voluntary Services (CVS)</i>  <i>7. Communications Officer, Church of England</i>
<b>Trade Union: 7</b>	<b>Trade Union: 1</b>
Amicus – national organiser Unison – national organiser T and G – national organiser	8. Member of Parliament, (formerly trade union national organiser)

Longitudinal research is commonly accepted in quantitative analysis but despite a long history and application is considered a relatively novel approach in qualitative studies (Corden and Millar 2007). Qualitative research has been dominated by case studies which provide a snap-shot into events while qualitative longitudinal research offers the potential to analyse change over the life course as



part of an iterative analytical process. Corden and Millar (2007 p.590) argue that qualitative longitudinal research 'must be an important part of the future social policy research agenda'.

The qualitative longitudinal interview also has a relatively underdeveloped codified methodology but can make an important contribution in examining experience in relation to policy changes to explore socially constructed reality and continuity and change (Hermanowicz 2013). This approach has particular relevance to voluntary sector studies. It can give temporal depth to analysis of the contextual issues involved in the complex, changing and intermediate role of the sector. This can then be related to the dynamic and multi-faceted processes of broader social change (Macmillan 2011). There are numerous advantages in exploring change in relation to lived human experience to gain data on perceptions of change from people with a diverse range of knowledge, experience and perspectives.

Qualitative longitudinal research is 'the ideal method for monitoring an individual's experience of change across time' but there are practical problems associated with the approach (Thomson and Holland 2003 p.233). Two interrelated concerns are intentionality in research design and securing continuing access over time. Longitudinal study had not been part of the original research design for this study so arrangements had not been made for repeat interviews. Attrition is an issue in longitudinal research and was an issue in this study which resulted in the need to conduct additional interviews. However, the research design for this study adopted the dominant contemporary model for qualitative longitudinal research based around repeat interviews which examine time and change in context to multi-faceted human experience and constructed contexts to explore, 'how people experience, interpret and respond to change' (Corden and Millar 2007, Hermanowicz 2013 p.189).

Interviewees were located through internet searches with contact made either direct or through current employers. Most participants were enthusiastic to continue in offering their insights around changes in the voluntary sector environment. However, adjustments were made, such as undertaking additional interviews to compensate for attrition to add to the data and contemporary relevance. Ethical concerns associated with obtaining, maintaining and ensuring continuing consent and the holding of data, such as interview recordings and transcripts, over a long and indefinite period of time were overcome by thoroughness in preparation and the securing of continuing consent from participants. Validity was not a central aim in the research which sought not facts or truth but authentic accounts from participants. However, validity and reliability can be affected by respondents' perceptions as memories change over time. The research approach dealt with this through detailed review of the recordings and transcripts from the original study and rigorous structuring of the interviews. These included an extensive introduction, which reminded the participants of the interviewer's background, role and research interests, and detailed feedback from the original interview highlighting themes, issues, views and concerns raised at the time. Beyond this extended introduction the interview was open and organised around the question, 'what has changed?' This allowed interviewees to reflect on their previous interview and frame their answers and develop themes taking account of what had changed in their environment over time.

It was recognised that some interviewees would be more comfortable with an open approach than others and a list of specific questions were produced as prompts if required. However, in general these were not needed and supplementary questions were based around the themes established by the interviewees themselves. Interviewees, when appropriate, were challenged to reflect on

apparent contradictions between their positions in the original interview and their current positions. The interviews were therefore demanding and involved reflection and analysis during the interview and focused attention to changes in the interviewee's positions over time. Longitudinal interviewing then calls for rigour and consistency in the preparation for interview, the conduct of the interviews and in the handling and analysing of large and complex datasets (Thomson and Holland 2003, Thomson 2007).

Repeat interviews were conducted with 5 of the 8 senior managers originally interviewed and 1 of 3 senior national union organisers. Two additional interviews were conducted, with representatives from Council for Voluntary Services (CVS) and religious organisations. The individual not the organisation was the central focus of the interview and apart from problems locating participants who had moved organisations, and time and workload constraints in arranging repeat interviews the interviews were successful as interviewees contributed enthusiastically to the further research.

The recorded interviews were subjected to repeat listening and were fully transcribed and coded. This allowed the main points and patterns within the interview to be established. The interviews were then compared to identify where accounts corroborated or contradicted each other. The current interview transcripts were then compared with the previous interview transcripts to establish changes between the initial and repeat interviews. The objective in the analysis was to apply detail and rigour to the critical subjective interpretation of the data to produce credible and authentic accounts and meaningful explanation based on the interviewee's perspectives and experience. The next section reports the main findings from the interviews. Details of individuals and organisations have been anonymised for reasons of confidentiality. The headings for the themes in the findings section below are partly grounded in the themes from the interviews but are also linked to the general themes developed from the literature review.

### **'Everything and Nothing'**

The longitudinal and additional interviews covered changes in government and voluntary sector relations, management structure and control, labour management and employee relations. They also covered changing attitudes on autonomy, the regulatory environment, campaigning and community representation which form the focus for this paper.

#### ***1. Regulation, Resources and Campaigning***

In answer to the open question 'what has changed', the CEO of the Radical Housing Trust responded 'everything and nothing' highlighting the complexity of understanding change in the sector (Interviewee 1). In 2005 the CEO had recently been appointed after the organisation was taken into Housing Corporation supervision and regulatory control. This followed the removal of a high profile radical campaigning Chief Officer. The new CEO was directed by regulators, the Audit Commission, to merge with a larger housing group to secure economies of scale which had been opposed by the previous Chief Officer. In 2005 the CEO explained that 'the absence of an identified group partner was, in the view of the commission, sufficient for it to be "uncertain" regarding the next stage in Radical's evolution' (Interviewee 1).

He was encouraged to strengthen management and financial practices including developing Human Resource Management (HRM). This was an approach to managing people that emphasised meeting

corporate strategic objectives, tightening discipline and managing individuals and teams to improve cost control and efficiency, engagement and organisational performance. The CEO said for the Commission 'robust financial viability is identified as being of the highest importance' and 'we are expected to have' such systems in place even though 'they are sometimes bureaucratic and sometimes expensive to have' (Interviewee 1).

There was a shift in the organisation from an overt campaigning role to a professional and managerialised, 'accountable' service delivery approach. In 2005 the CEO said the aim was 'to turn things around' following the perceived mismanagement of the former Chief Officer, which had included extensive public and political campaigning on homelessness and related issues. However, the CEO maintained that regulation and supervision and merger were an essential response in a climate of uncertain funding and regulatory pressure even though it reduced autonomy and campaigning freedom (Interviewee 1).

By 2014 the organisation had, unusually, merged and then demerged following disagreements around management autonomy. The implications of this on campaigning for a medium size organisation with limited financial reserves were, the CEO said, severe as "we are too large to survive as a small hand to mouth existence because we pay 250 people a month and as a result I have to know that on the 21<sup>st</sup> of each month if we have £650,000 cash in the bank to pay people'. The CEO said that the financial, regulatory and contracting environment in 2014 was far harsher than in 2005 as service users were suffering from austerity which led to far greater demands on services, managers and employees while resources continued to be cut (Interviewee 1).

The CEO had pointed in 2005 to the threat of funding withdrawal for non-compliance as regulators were 'determined to drive down the cost of the services' but in 2014 he pointed to a climate of fear for voluntary sector leaders where 'funding is about compliance' and CEOs' minds were constantly focused on organisational, and personal, survival. He explained how the funding realities were illustrated to him by the collapse of People Can, a large homeless support service charity which employed 300 people and held contracts with numerous local authorities, which closed suddenly sending a shockwave through the sector and he feared there would be many more examples of organisational collapse in the future (Butler 2012, Interviewee 1).

Similar concerns were expressed by the Regional Director of Parents, a national charity which had been set up by parents of children with drug and alcohol problems to provide support services. In 2005 the organisation was rapidly expanding under government pressure to provide 24/7 drug treatment services but the director said that although things were 'far more target oriented than they were before' his area still had 'light touch' regulation. However, by 2015 he was leaving the charity for a policy position with a competing and larger drug and alcohol agency. At the time of the original interview he had been a loyal and committed manager expecting to continue with the organisation through to retirement. However, in 2015 he was critical of changes in the organisational culture at Parents, which he felt were the result of the increasingly competitive and unworkable contracting environment. He believed 'Tendering has gone mad in the last few years . . . you have a completely different approach to commissioning . . . because it's subjected much more to the kind of blasts of competitive wind that, if you like, local authorities themselves are feeling' (Interviewee 2).

Reductions in funding, the removal of campaigning leaders and closure of voluntary organisations are not a recent phenomenon. In 2005 the Reformed Trust, a small Midlands homelessness organisation, was forced into liquidation following the removal of Supporting People (see Note 1) funding. This came after public opposition to its campaigns for homeless people and concern at management standards but the Chief Officer felt that the organisation had become 'accountable substantially to Supporting People' and 'incredibly tightly regulated'. He had continued to protest at strategies that treated homeless people 'in effect as a number' rather than focusing on 'human outcomes'. By 2015 the former Chief Officer of Reformed Trust was working as a housing strategy officer for a Northern Local Authority. He felt he had suffered personally for speaking out for disadvantaged people, in terms of a damaged reputation and career, and financially, in terms of reduced earning power and liabilities from liquidation. The Reformed Trust folded when the trustees handed back the keys to the properties they ran to Supporting People, an act the former chief officer described as a 'display of true voluntarism . . . acknowledging that the problems are not ours' but those of government, funders and regulators (Interviewee 5).

At the time of the interview with a CVS (Council for Voluntary Service) representative in 2005 CVS were growing, well funded and organised and believed they were influential in advocating for the development of CVS, for voluntary sector organisations and disadvantaged people and communities. By 2015 the Northern CVS CEO was concerned at the impact of austerity on both CVS, as an umbrella organisation, and its voluntary organisation members. He explained how the stability and growth of the New Labour years ended and 'in 2010 it felt like it hit a brick wall'. He said that in 2015 'we don't have the resources . . . we have a very good relationship with our local authority and they are getting hit like anyone and we are doing our best to support them' (Interviewee 6). The consequences of regulatory control, competitive contracting and funding cuts could be felt, he said in forced organisational mergers, excessive workloads, patchy provision, the growth of vulnerable social enterprises, the removal of services and organisational closures and he said 'we are just now seeing the more organisations beginning to close . . . and I think that will continue' (Interviewee 7).

## **2. *Autonomy and Advocacy***

The ability of voluntary organisations, such as the Radical Housing Trust, to engage in political campaigning was limited in 2005. The CEO pointed out that while in theory 'we have as much autonomy as we like' in practice 'we would lose funding [if government was resisted so] you judge carefully what to take a stand on' (Interviewee 1). He had complied with merger and management changes as his longer term aim was to retain autonomy and continue to campaign on behalf of homeless people beyond the supervision crisis. He felt compliance and the loss of some autonomy was necessary, in the short term, to secure the organisation's future. In 2014 the CEO felt 'personally more confident . . . to criticise . . . [government policy] through my blog, through newspaper articles, journals, conference papers' but he also said that the reality was that he was fearful of the consequences of speaking out (Interviewee 1). It continued to be the case that 'It's a tricky position about the hand that feeds you, how much you challenge that' (Interviewee 1).

The Director at Parents was also fearful for the future of voluntary sector voice if the current political trajectory was followed. In 2005 Parents was publicly critical of government policy but by 2015 the director was disillusioned as he felt the sector no longer had a voice and could not ensure adequate services for the people it was meant to represent (Interviewee 2).

In 2005 the CEO of Cuddle Co-ops, a mental health charity based around an empowerment, self-help and support model, believed that though regulatory pressures impacted on autonomy and campaigning it raised professional standards as 'all organisations were now raising their game' and improving their efficiency as 'competition is driving up standards across the board, which is what it is supposed to do' (Interviewee 3). By 2014 he felt that it had become harder to campaign effectively on mental health issues for 'if you make too much noise you're not going to get your funding'. He felt the government did not need to explicitly prevent campaigning through threats to reduce or remove funding for 'If it's not being said, people are worrying about that anyway and they'll adjust, they'll self-regulate their behaviour accordingly' (Interviewee 3).

Larger housing associations were often heralded as the more stable and independent section of the voluntary sector and had developed in a period of 'extensive and generous central state support' (Kendall 2003 p. 138, Mullins 2000). In the current period, however, they were experiencing severe pressures which affected autonomy and voice. In 2005 the Managing Director (MD) of Lakeside Housing Trust was a regional director for Philanthropy, a large housing group with an emphasis on community based support for disadvantaged tenants. In 2006 she left this group when it merged with a larger housing group which she felt changed the culture from a caring approach to a more commercially oriented style of management. The MD also held a strong identification and career commitment to working with disadvantaged communities in the North of England and felt the new organisation, a southern local authority transfer association, would not keep an autonomous estate based structure (Interviewee 4). In 2005 she believed that Philanthropy was directed by a 'government agenda that is leading us all in certain ways' and 'a lot of it is top down' and away from meeting community needs. By 2014 she felt the problems affecting the sector were more intense. Lakeside was battling with funding shortfalls, which prevented planned social housing developments, impacted on tenant incomes and the positive relationships she had tried to develop between the organisation and its tenants and threatened business viability through rent arrears, bad debts, and high void rates. The MD felt the future was stark as housing association activity shifted from affordable social housing to for-profit private landlord activity and Lakeside had no effective voice in limiting the impact of such changes (Interviewee 4). The impact of austerity on tenants and the lack of campaigning voice, she said, had been brought to a head with the under occupancy charge or 'Bedroom Tax' (see note 2 below). She felt the impact of this on the north was simply not understood by the Coalition and Conservative majority governments, who did not understand the lack of smaller tenanted properties in the north or the needs of northern tenants and communities. Lakeside had campaigned against the charge and 'went to the houses of parliament, met ministers and put our case to them' but she felt it was a waste of time as government did not listen to the arguments. She said 'they were going to take £18bn off the welfare budget' and 'you can only cut that budget if you take money off the people who are going to receive it' (Interviewee 4).

In 2005 the national organiser for the trade union was involved in government support initiatives for the voluntary sector in partnership with agencies such as NCVO, seeking to improve employment practices and tackling issues, such as job insecurity, low pay and poor training and development. By 2015 the organiser was now an MP but she was disillusioned by the political isolation and loss of voice of the voluntary sector which she blamed on a failed strategy where the sector 'wanted to replace statutory services rather than provide originality and as a result of moving into provision they then lost their uniqueness' (Interviewee 8).

The CVS representatives in 2005 had said that they had increasing voice but in 2015 the CEO said that continued financial and political pressures affected autonomy and the ability to speak out publically against the impact of austerity saying 'the government says they will work with us and give that public impression but if you speak out it puts the brakes on an ongoing dialogue'. As a result of negative experiences he said he would not now speak out in public about the impact of government policy and had 'the majority of those conversations in private' (Interviewee 6).

### ***3. Professionalisation, Corporate Control and Voice***

Managerialisation from 2005 brought consequences for Radical Housing, with industrial action taken by employees in response to pay cuts and the erosion of employment terms and conditions and increased disciplinary action, dismissals and downsizing (Interviewee 1). The CEO had demerged because the larger group argued that tighter corporate control was needed to prevent the subsidiary becoming a financial risk to their larger group. The CEO commented that the larger housing group's business model, while effective in financial and growth terms, was highly risk averse and there were continual concerns that radical political advocacy could bring negative publicity producing risk which could quickly damage loan covenants and destabilise the larger group's financial security (interviewee 1).

At Parents the Regional Director thought competitive contracting pressures brought centralisation under a controlling caucus of senior managers as decisions were now taken in a less democratic, consultative and participative manner (Interviewee 2). He was now, for his own security, moving to a larger organisation as 'what you have seen in the last ten years is consolidation where smaller organisations just cannot compete any more' (Interviewee 2).

The Reformed Trust was forced into liquidation in 2005. Its Chief Officer argued this was due to its position on open access to services and political advocacy for homeless people. The services following liquidation were transferred to larger national and medium sized voluntary organisations. The former Chief officer thought larger organisations, dependent on government contracts, did not challenge and were incorporated with government while medium sized organisations, were often well-meaning and client focused, but struggled financially, dependent unsustainably upon volunteers and unpaid labour. Small campaigning organisations, like his, he felt were squeezed out. He said this meant it was now 'really hard to develop radical approaches' as organisations were increasingly centrally controlled (Interviewee 5).

The MP had in her union role in 2005 complained at the slow pace of improvement in employees conditions as 'the problem we face is resources, it's very resource intensive' (Interviewee 8). But by 2015 she felt the impact on voluntary sector employees was felt through cuts which led to poorer employment terms and conditions, more aggressive management styles and the extension of unpaid voluntary labour which had led to fragmented and stretched welfare services. She felt there was a gap between remote leadership and overstretched employees and 'people are cracking up, that's what's happening in the statutory sector but it is also coming into the voluntary sector where the cuts are really hitting because they are still 100% committed to service users, want to provide the best service so not wanting them to experience the pain that they are seeing so they stretch over that gap' (Interviewee 8).

### ***4. Austerity and Welfare Need***

The Regional Director at Parents was leaving not only due to contracting pressures and centralising management but also because he felt the care and treatment received by service users had 'really started to be chipped away at . . . in terms of what we can do for people, in having to cut corners . . . having less one to one time with people' (Interviewee 2).

In 2005 religious organisations were encouraged into and welcomed developing partnerships with local and central government. By 2015 there was concern at the pressures the church was under (Interviewee 7). Religious organisations have often been a last resort for vulnerable disadvantaged people and the faith-based representative said that her church had, since the economic recession, seen a dramatic increase in the number of people seeking assistance. She said that while the church had spoken out publicly concerning issues such as rising levels of personal debt and growth in the numbers of people using foodbanks (Wintour and Butler 2014) and 'there was strength in local religious communities' willingness to support disadvantaged people, evidenced by food donations to foodbanks, the church lacked voice and was constrained in what it could do due to overstretched resources. She felt local authorities supported partnership with faith organisations as 'council resources are stretched to breaking point' but she also felt 'our resources are stretched as well' and the last resort was being chipped away (Interviewee 7). Despite high profile campaigning it was argued the church was not an effective campaigner. It did not have a unified voice and while individual clergy campaigned against government policy and responded to increased demands for assistance as a whole the 'clergy are massively overworked . . . and they are not social workers' and the scale of need they faced meant 'there's a bit of fatigue actually' (Interviewee 7).

### ***5. Social Enterprise and Community Action***

The CEO of Cuddle Co-ops founded the mental health charity as he was frustrated by NHS bureaucracy. He supported individualisation, or a move from collective to forms of service provision based around the needs of the individual, and felt that in practice this was the only remaining way to meet need given the continuing cuts to traditional mental health and voluntary service funding. The project from 2000 had established itself as a hub for advocacy for people with mental health problems and for individualised, self-help projects with a strong sustainability foundation, based around a commercial community garden enterprise (Interviewee 3). The CEO argued that in the harder environment of 2015 more radical and innovative approaches to service provision were needed. This meant the organisation was 'involved in some of the service user campaigns', but its main emphasis was around 'campaigning for the model' of individualised support to people with mental health problems. The CEO was in principle 'a strong advocate of the process of individualisation' but was clear that service users, severely affected by welfare cuts, did not always support this model. He recognised it isolated individuals and impacted negatively on campaigning to defend collective provision as 'It's much easier . . . for service users and carers to rally around the closure of a day centre . . . but if you are going to reduce 29 budgets you can do that at the stroke of a pen' (Interviewee 3). He said 'many people are in dire situations' as individualisation and the move to individual budgets provides a cover for cuts to essential, lifeline community mental health services (Interviewee 3).

The former Chief Officer of Reformed believed his organisation in 2005 had spoken out for homeless people but he was angry that now no-one spoke out about the 'increase in rough sleeping, which was all but non-existent 10 years ago' (Interviewee 5). He said he would like to establish new and

radical services to meet need but that it was hard to set up new services. He said this now needed the miracle of money, planning consent, available and affordable trained staff capable of dealing with challenging behaviour and resilience as organisations encountered more public and media opposition. He felt the only way forward was for 'clients to form their own group to, as a group, take on their own accommodation' so that they are then 'freed from the dead hand of bureaucracy' (Interviewee 5). The best example of an alternative approach, he claimed, lay in the foodbanks which place 'particular emphasis on community action and participation, aiming to bring the community together around the foodbanks cause' which he contrasted with the remote and compliant managerialist approach adopted by the large, corporate voluntary sector (Lambie-Mumford 2013 p. 81, Interviewee 5).

In 2005 the MP as a trade union representative, despite concerns at limited effectiveness, had been involved in formal dialogue, campaigning and advocacy with government. In 2015 the MP felt campaigning was limited as people had shut down and now just tried to cope. The remedy she suggested was a return to grassroots campaigning which involved 'going back and organising grassroots and building that organisation back' (Interviewee 8). She felt the problem with the voluntary sector was that 'it's just lost its teeth' and voluntary sector organisations, leaders and employees needed to position themselves alongside disadvantaged people and support broad community organisation and campaigns for a return to rational public welfare, to protect welfare workers, service users and the distinctive campaigning voice and role of the sector (Interviewee 8).

In 2005 the CVS representative argued the central and growing role for CVS in advocating for the voluntary sector and voluntary action. However, the CVS CEO in 2015 pointed to a lack of engagement between the formal voluntary sector and community campaigns. Even where they had 'sort of accidentally found ourselves saying the same sort of thing' this was not built upon and he was cautious of linking with radical community organisations because 'there are still years of cuts to come'. He felt 'the lobbying bill was a kind of pre-emptive strike' and in that sense 'it's kind of warded us off from campaigning' (Interviewee 7, Morris 2015).

### **Discussion, Analysis and Conclusions: The changing space in which the voluntary sector in England can express critical voice**

The research examined the following questions:

#### ***Has austerity changed the relationship between the state and voluntary sector and the ability of the voluntary sector to provide voice for the disadvantaged?***

The findings on how austerity has impacted upon the ability of the English voluntary sector to provide critical voice are pessimistic. All interviewees expressed belief that austerity had intensified pressures on voluntary organisations bringing increased competition, financial and service demands. All cited the growth of corporate control and compliance with funders and government policy demands amid concerns that this resulted in increasing remoteness from service users. Despite continued involvement in lobbying government over concerns at deteriorating welfare provision most felt frustrated by their inability to advocate effectively on behalf of disadvantaged people and communities.



The longitudinal approach to the research points to how austerity, and a period of profound political, economic and social change in the UK, has changed relations between the state, market and voluntary sector. There was evidence from the research to support Schmid *et al* 2008 in that austerity creates a tougher political environment and pressures from funding cuts can impact on the willingness of voluntary organisations to engage in and to effectively express critical voice for disadvantaged people and communities. This contradicts NPG arguments that partnership and ‘co-governance’ has enhanced voluntary sector voice and that relations with government are characterised by interdependence not dependence (Taylor 2011). It also contradicts research findings from the US that financial dependency and involvement with government strengthens rather than reduces political advocacy in nonprofit organisations (Chaves *et al* 2004, Salamon 2008).

The longitudinal perspective illustrates the complexities around continuities and change in campaigning, lobbying and expressing critical voice. The approach allowed interviewees to reflect on the ongoing tensions around autonomy and the ability to campaign and lobby for disadvantaged people, and practical concerns around funding and institutional compliance (Interviewee 1). This relationship was seen to be a difficult balancing act and one which appeared to have become more difficult with austerity.

The findings support neo-institutional and resource dependency theories, which argue that an increase in professionalization and marketisation has been damaging to critical voice (Mullins and Jones 2015, Bode and Bransden 2014). Interviewee 5 felt his homelessness organisation was punished through funding withdrawal for its ‘failure’ to professionalise and comply with regulator demands and its advocacy of unpopular political arguments on homelessness. Interviewee 8 believed that the autonomy and voice of the voluntary sector in general had been compromised as a result of the sector’s strategy to professionalize and engage in partnership with government, with severe consequences with the change in government and the austerity environment. Interviewees reported a shift to more managerial, professional and commercial orientations. Though this was initially welcomed by some (Interviewee 6), over time this was seen to be damaging to the ability to express critical voice.

Professionalisation and marketisation, it was explained, changed management practices and organisational cultures, reduced internal democracy and introduced more aggressive corporate business management approaches focused on efficient service delivery not advocacy. Respondents reported a climate of fear at the political consequences of expressing critical voice and felt that the sector’s views were no longer encouraged or supported by government. They pointed to how funding dependency and austerity led to legal and policy compliance, even where there was no evidence of negative sanctions in response to political advocacy. A significant finding of the study may be that what CEOs *believe* or *fear* can, of itself, be an important factor in the willingness to express critical voice (Chaves *et al* 2004). This may be a major consideration in a political environment, such as in the UK since 2010, where critical voice can be construed as challenging government ideological and political positions around austerity and welfare provision.

The evidence from the research supports theories which argue that institutionalisation and isomorphic pressures lead to self-muzzling and compliance as organisations, fearing negative outcomes, limit critical voice. This is a danger in a system where government controls funding for services, measures service delivery outcomes and emphasises the importance of service delivery

(Wolch 1990, DiMaggio and Powell 1983, Whelan 1999, Milbourne and Cushman 2015, Schmid *et al* 2008, Rochester 2013). Interviewee 4 witnessed the transformation of the community orientation of her housing organisation, following merger with a larger commercially oriented housing association. In her new organisation she continued to campaign for community responsive approaches, including against the 'bedroom tax', using political connections and 'insider' lobbying as well as supporting sector campaigns. However, she felt demoralised that the critical voice of the sector was no longer listened to and was viewed negatively by government. Numerous examples were given where individual CEOs were cautious about engaging publically in 'political' issues for fear of funding withdrawal and where funding pressures encouraged conformity and a compliance mentality (Interviewee 1, 2, 3, 6). Interviewee 6 argued that CVS had experienced growth and autonomy in political advocacy prior to the financial crisis but this had ended with political change and austerity, leaving a deficit of support for voice for voluntary organisations in meeting welfare needs. It may be argued that Chaves *et al* 2004 were correct in that financial dependency and involvement with government in the US in a period of growth strengthened rather than reduced political advocacy. However, austerity in the UK, with fewer resources available for voluntary sector organisations campaigning, combined with a tighter regulatory environment and institutional controls and financial dependency, may reduce political advocacy. The research provided evidence of wariness around engagement in public 'outsider' opposition. Interviewees pointed to how organisations had become more accountable to government and funders in an increasingly competitive, commercial environment and how service delivery, funding and organisational survival now dominated over campaigning and lobbying (Interview 1, 4, 5).

The evidence supports Salamon's (2008) findings that voluntary organisations are restricted in their ability to express critical voice due to a lack of resources for campaigning. Interviewee 1 believed that homelessness organisations, despite more professionalised management, struggled with financial and service demands, leaving little time or resources for political advocacy. Interviewees felt small organisations were focused on the struggle to survive, while larger organisations, due to concerns over financial liabilities tended towards risk aversion, with institutional restrictions on the autonomy to express critical voice (Interviewee 1, 2, 5).

Milbourne and Cushman (2015) have argued that institutional ideologies condition organisational conduct and mindsets. Silverman and Patterson (2011) suggest that the creation of a "nonprofit industrial complex" emphasises service provision over political advocacy which stifles dissent. Reliance on public or private donors, it is argued, restricts alternative practices and the willingness to express critical voice on behalf of marginalised disadvantaged groups. Interviewee 2 argued that drug and alcohol organisations, which in 2005 were well funded, lightly regulated and free to engage in broad campaigning, were now, due to the combination of competitive pressures, tighter corporate control and reduced internal democracy, less autonomous or likely to campaign or express critical voice openly. Many of the interviewees (1, 2, 3 and 4) explained how austerity impacted over time on the internal structure, culture and practices of their organisations. This could take the form of pressure to merge with larger corporate organisations, moves from democratic to corporate forms of control and the introduction of stricter management regimes. The financial pressures and constant threat of organisational closure were argued to limit campaigning freedom due to the focus on the struggle to continue to provide services. Though patterns of change varied between organisations, dependent on the service, funding patterns and history, interviewees felt that organisational cultures, based around grassroots campaigning and activism (Interviewee 1),

broad political campaigning (Interviewee 2), radical alternative service design (Interviewee 3), community service models (Interviewee 4) and critical local campaigning approaches (Interviewee 5) had been negatively affected.

***Have the strategies that voluntary organisations pursue to influence the state and empower communities been constrained with austerity?***

Theoretical debates on the strategies used by voluntary organisations to express critical voice have tended to polarise around the relative effectiveness of 'insider' and 'outsider' strategies, though in practice organisations use nuanced combinations of strategies. Advocates of 'insider' strategies state that voluntary organisations are most effective when they adopt 'insider' strategies which build long term confidence in state-voluntary sector relations and which help to achieve sustained dialogue and influence (Craig *et al* 2004, McGhee and Bennett 2016, Acheson and Milofsky 2010, Taylor 2011). However, neo-institutional and resource dependency theories emphasise the danger of 'insider' strategies leading to incorporation, moderation and compliance with calls for a return to support for critical grassroots and associational 'outsider' strategies (Rochester 2013, Baring Foundation 2014, NCIA 2015). 'Insider' advocacy, it is argued, distances and isolates organisations from communities and associational grassroots, which can be accentuated in a period of austerity, tightening regulation and commissioning, leading to problems representing and expressing the scale of problems experienced in communities (Rochester 2013, Taylor 2011, Schmid *et al* 2008). Interviewees expressed concern that while theoretically free to campaign, this freedom needed to be balanced carefully against consideration of potential institutional consequences. Political advocacy which had once been considered part of the internal democratic process and campaigning purpose and mission of the organisations could now be seen as a risk organisationally (Interviewee 1, 2).

However, while 'outsider' strategies may offer connectedness to disadvantaged groups and communities it was difficult for small organisations to express critical voice as they had limited resources, power or 'insider' voice. They were also fearful of the consequences if they supported critical 'outsider' strategies and campaigns, even where there were common interests (Interviewee 3, 4). Interviewee 4 was exasperated by the failure of housing associations to effectively use 'insider' influence to change government policy on the bedroom tax while interviewee 5 believed that regulatory and funding authorities ignored organisations' views about strategies for tackling homelessness and reacted negatively to such critical 'insider' campaigning. The failure of 'insider' lobbying led the organisation to critical 'outsider' campaigning but, the chief officer argued, this strategy was also unsuccessful, leading to the removal of funds and organisational closure. This example, from 2005, shows that even prior to austerity it was difficult for small voluntary organisations to gain influence. Campaigning organisations, such as the CVS, religious organisations and trade unions were concerned at the loss of 'insider' influence (Interviews 6, 7 and 8). Financial and resource pressures on CVS meant that political advocacy could now only take place in private (Interviewee 6). While there was evidence of flexible and innovative 'outsider' grass roots voluntary organisation strategies which seek to empower communities and provide voice (Interviewee 3, 5) it was recognised that 'insider' influence was largely the domain of larger, corporate and professionalised organisations. There were significant problems organising smaller organisations, in a period of austerity, to achieve influence using either 'insider' or 'outsider' campaigning tactics (Interviewee 3, 5, 7, 8). Religious organisations were often a backstop in meeting unmet welfare

demand but were also under pressure, unable to cope with demands or speak in a unified collective voice for disadvantaged people and communities (Interviewee 7). There was evidence in the research that voluntary organisations' CEOs were unwilling to link to grassroots campaigns choosing to make insider 'deals' in private even where their interests coincided (Interviewee 6). For many organisations risk aversion limited advocacy and focused on institutional concerns not action for disadvantaged people and communities (Interviewee 2, 3)

***How successful have alternative social models that the voluntary sector has pursued been?***

The voluntary sector has historically been flexible in developing strategies to empower communities, project the voice of disadvantaged people and influence welfare provision. It has, at different times, been marginalised from, taken radical action against, and been seen as an alternative provider or incorporated as a partner with the state (Davis Smith *et al* 1995, Kendall 2000, Anheier 2014). Interviewees believed that voluntary sector organisations still had a role to play in expressing critical voice but that greater resilience and flexibility and was required in the current context (Interviewee 1, 3, 4, 8).

This was seen by respondents as especially important as larger organisations became professionalised and risk averse and voluntary organisations and sector representatives appeared fearful and to have less 'political' influence (Rochester 2013, Salamon 2008, Milbourne and Cushman 2015, Interviewee 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). The research findings supported the view that while there was an appeal to developing 'outsider' campaigning strategies this was hard to develop in the context of austerity (Rochester 2013, Taylor 2011). There was optimism in attempts to empower service users around innovative self-help and alternative, associational models to negate funding reliance and create space to empower service users and provide voice. The individualisation, social enterprise commercial approach provided self-help alternatives to grant funding to empower outside of competitive commissioning processes. However, in a harsh funding environment, there were concerns this could impact negatively on remaining collective provision (Interviewee 3). There was evidence of consistent efforts to establish new associational models, often supported through religious organisation, such as the foodbanks, to highlight poverty and disadvantage and express critical voice (Interviewee 5, 7). There was confidence that grassroots and critical campaigning could continue to be developed despite austerity. However, concrete evidence illustrating the success of community action, community unionism and building links between the mainstream voluntary sector and new social movements was largely absent from the study (Taylor 2011, Interviewee 4, 6, 7, 8). The impact of coalitions and intermediaries in campaigning could be seen in reduced direct involvement in campaigning by individual organisations (Salamon 2008, Interviewee 3). Instances were cited of disunity in community campaigning and also of campaigning fatigue due to the scale of pressures faced. (Interviewee 1, 4, 8). While the potential for creating new discourses and organising to bring about positive social change remains and organisations have sought alternative approaches to express critical voice there was little evidence in the study of mainstream voluntary sector organisations supporting or building new associational social movements (Taylor 2011, Milbourne and Cushman 2015, Taylor 2011, Schmid *et al* 2008). There are problems developing unified voice among disparate communities and the research revealed concerns that austerity is undermining the last resort of welfare provision (Interviewee 5, 6, 7, 8). Alternative discourses have not, so far it appears, emerged that challenge incorporation, reductions in service quality, or project and organisational closures (Taylor 2011, Holgate 2013). The ability to express critical voice is recognised

as a core foundation of civil society (Chaves *et al* 2004). While the findings of the research are largely pessimistic the potential for civil society organisations to challenge the current climate of fear and create unity across government and civil society organisations and raise morale in the future remains.

To summarise, this research contrasts with quantitative empirical findings, largely from the US, that voluntary sector relations with the state and financial dependency strengthens political advocacy. This paper argues that there are differences between the US and England in terms of legal restrictions on political advocacy and the ideological context regarding political support for critical voice. The paper supports neo-institutional and resource dependency theories regarding the dangers of incorporation and moderation in political demands, especially for large risk averse, corporate and professional organisations, which can become detached from disadvantaged people and communities. Austerity, it is argued, advances the process of incorporation which limits critical voice as smaller grassroots organisations have limited time and resources to engage in critical lobbying. Organisations are fearful of losing further funding in an austerity environment, and fear, in itself, can limit critical voice. However, voluntary organisations, and the voluntary sector, cannot expect to survive if unable to express critical voice or defend the disadvantaged groups and communities they were created to protect.

Although drawing on a limited evidence base from a small number of respondents and case study organisations in England it is felt that the longitudinal and qualitative nature of the study provides depth and a more nuanced view of the extent and effectiveness of advocacy and critical voice which is missing in many of the snapshot quantitative studies of this subject area.

## Notes

1. Supporting People funds housing related support services that landlords (such as housing associations or voluntary organisations) provide. This support includes advice and help to make it easier for vulnerable people to maintain their independence in and keep their home.
2. The Under-occupancy charge or 'Bedroom Tax' was a change in housing benefit regulations which meant that people living in housing association property might receive less benefit if they had spare bedrooms in their property that they did not use. This controversial change in regulations meant that tenants would have to either pay the additional charge thus reducing their benefit income, seek work or take in lodgers to make up the difference or move home.

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