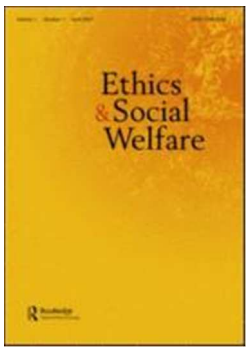

Embodied Austerity: Narratives of Early Austerity from a Homelessness and Resettlement Service

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Abstract

The impact of austerity and welfare reform on staff in the caring services is an emerging story yet to be fully told (Benozzo and Colley 2012). This paper presents three narratives of early austerity drawn from fourteen in-depth interviews with staff of a small homelessness and resettlement service in England from 2011 to 2014. Experiences are represented through narratives of 'emerging realities, 'deletion' and 'changing relations'. The workers' stories revealed that the extent of welfare reforms and funding cuts not only impacted on the provision of services, but also on personal and professional values held by homelessness and resettlement service staff (Groundswell 2011, Scanlon and Adlam 2012). Ethics of care, as embodied ethical practice in emotional, identity and interactive work, formed the basis for relationships between staff and homeless people or those at risk of homelessness (Banks 2011). The rapidly changed funding and policy context for homelessness and resettlement services destabilised workers' self-concept as providers of relational care (Dobson 2011). Finally, a concept of 'embodied austerity' is offered from reflections on everyday experiences of austerity over time and contributes, perhaps, to a common story of workers' experiences during a period of social welfare in hard times (Banks 2016).

Keywords: Austerity, Welfare Reform, Relational Care, Homelessness and Resettlement Services, England

Introduction

This paper draws on research conducted during a period of substantial fiscal change and welfare restructuring in England. The study examined the multiple ways early austerity and welfare reforms were experienced by staff and service users of a small homelessness and resettlement support service, within a larger charity, during the period of 2011 to 2014. From 2010 the Coalition Government's response to the economic deficit created a period of great uncertainty for the community and voluntary sector as funding cuts announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review, and the implementation of welfare reforms in the White Paper Universal Credit: Welfare that Works, began to take effect (Bird 2010, Department for Work and Pensions 2010). The impetus for this research began with conversations with a Trustee of the charity, who in late 2010 expressed their apprehensions about the consequences of austerity for the community and voluntary sector that delivered homelessness and resettlement services in particular. Apprehension was raised on two fronts; the potential operational and financial impacts, and concerns about social justice regarding single homeless men. There were specific implications for staff and service users of the small project-funded homelessness and resettlement unit within the charity providing services for up to 40 single homeless men. The service was funded under Supporting People a ring fenced funding strand established in 2003 to enable Local Authorities to work through the community and voluntary sector to support very vulnerable people including those experiencing homelessness (House of Commons 2012). In 2009 a ring fence to funding under Supporting People was removed, and by 2011, crisis and social care funds for

homeless people were devolved to Local Authorities for use as discretionary funds (Buckingham 2012). In addition, Local Authorities do not have a statutory duty to support single homeless men and couples without children, as they are not considered in priority need unless they are deemed to have become unintentionally homeless (House of Commons 2012). Therefore, services that support single homeless men who may have become homeless due to drug or alcohol problems, are less likely to be prioritised for funding, putting staff at risk of losing jobs and service users with multiple exclusion factors at risk of losing specific services (Dwyer et al. 2012).

Trustees were keen to find a way to capture impacts of austerity and welfare reforms and to use the research to promote a concerned voice for social justice. This context then led to the broader study, designed as a watching brief to provide a commentary of austerity, over a specific time, in order to understand particular implications for homelessness and resettlement services at a local level. An earlier paper focused on changing realities for people accessing homeless services as voiced by co-researchers from the service user group (XXXX 2012). This paper focuses on the experiences of staff involved with the homelessness and resettlement service and offers perspectives on the everyday impacts of austerity and welfare reform on people's work during the period 2011 to 2014.

Early austerity

The global recession in 2008/2009 had already resulted in a significant impact on budgets for social services and on communities already experiencing deprivation. Tunstall and Fenton (2009) revealed that reduced Local Authority budgets were directly linked to a decrease in spending on public and community and voluntary sector provision of services for vulnerable people, including homelessness services. Budget constraints led to significant loss of jobs in local authorities, with 20 per cent of Local Authorities either making redundancies, or freezing jobs. At the same time, it was reported by most councils that recession had led to increased demands for social services (Tunstall and Fenton 2009). Subsequently, considerable job losses and reduced funding affected the community and voluntary sector that provided commissioned services on behalf of Local Authorities, with 75 homelessness services reported to have closed between January 2010 and March 2011 (Homeless Link 2011).

Analysis of year-on-year funding cuts to local authority budgets in 2011/2012 exposed a variation in the distribution of cuts to Local Authority areas in that reductions in central funds disproportionately affected those with greater numbers of vulnerable groups (Hastings et al. 2012). Analysis of Local Authority spending power in 2011/2012 revealed that the most deprived local authority in England, Liverpool, had lost 11.34% of its spending power, while the most affluent local authority in England, Richmond, had only lost 0.61% of its spending power (Hastings et al. 2012,15). A survey of 25 Local Authority responses on management of budget retraction and social services remodelling showed two distinct approaches emerging in 2010; those that intended to remodel services from universal provision for vulnerable groups to targeted provision for individuals; and those that planned to focus on area-based and spatial approaches to services provision (Hastings et al, 2012, 37-39). A survey completed by 42 Local Authorities in 2012 examined the impacts of welfare reforms on homelessness services and found that while many Local Authorities had an overview of welfare reforms, most felt unprepared strategically for the extent of change.

In addition, they lacked sufficient detailed information for future planning and commissioning of homelessness services (Homeless Link, 2013).

Market orientated welfare systems at local level includes competitive commissioning of services (Buckingham 2012). Buckingham (2012, 579-585) provides a useful typology of community and voluntary sector organisations based on how they engage with commissioning and contracting of homelessness services in England. Four types of organisations are characterised as follows. Comfortable contractors operate a business-like approach to tendering for and implementation of government contracts, and they have no volunteer involvement or income from voluntary sources. Homelessness and resettlement support is not a major part of their operations, and many may be housing associations. Compliant contractors also adopt business-like and professional practices. Mainly charities, these may have become dependent on government contracts and have proportionately minimal voluntary income. Cautious contractors are those supported by multiple stakeholders and have both paid and volunteer staff. They have significant voluntary and charitable income raised from their own faith or issue based constituencies and additionally tender for some government contracts. Community based non-contractors rely on voluntary income and do not tender for government contracts but may access re-distributed funds locally via health trusts and larger charities. Volunteer staff are locally organised and often work from a faith, issues or values base to deliver community based services (Buckingham 2012). Competitive tendering processes increasingly included requirements for the provision of detailed auditing reports, target setting for reductions of street homelessness and data on numbers of people moved on from temporary accommodation within given timeframes, thus placing smaller cautious or community based contractors at a disadvantage (Devine 2003, Bird 2010, Buckingham 2012, Homeless Link 2013).

Homelessness and resettlement support services in England

From 2008 to 2015 significant, upward trends in homelessness were noted during the periods of recession and early implementation of austerity measures and welfare reforms (Crisis 2012, Stuckler and Basu 2013). Homelessness acceptances, that is successful applications for Local Authority support from people deemed to be in statutory and priority need, peaked at 52,000 in 2013/2014, up from 40,000 in 2009/10 (Fitzpatrick et al. 2015). A small reduction of 2 per cent in 2014/15 was reported. However, these homelessness acceptances data for those in statutory priority need do not include a further 228,000 successful applications by in-work households for non-statutory homelessness prevention and relief that was granted by local authorities in England in 2013/14 (Fitzpatrick et al. 2015). In the second quarter of 2015 reasons given for the loss of the last settled home included the following; loss of assured tenancy, no longer able to stay with relatives or friends, relationship breakdown, mortgage and rent arrears, and loss of other rented accommodation (Homeless Link 2015). Homelessness and risk of homelessness remains unreported in England. Men's hidden experiences of homelessness may be governed by gendered assumptions, for example men's experience of domestic violence (Bowpit et al. 2011). Women's hidden homelessness occurs when women attempt to normalise family life by staying with family or friends (Abrahams et al. 2015). It has been estimated that in 2012, 8 per cent of young people under the age of 25 had experienced homelessness in England in the last five years (Fitzpatrick et al. 2011). Young people leaving Local Authority care or the youth justice systems are particularly vulnerable to homelessness (Clapham et al. 2014, Homeless Link 2014). Single homeless men and women draw on informal family and

community based resources and assets as a coping strategy in times of crisis (Bowpit et al. 2011).

Supporting People had increased the involvement of community, voluntary, charity and faith based organisations in provision of homelessness and resettlement services (Dwyer et al. 2012, Hastings et al. 2012). The role of homelessness and resettlement front line workers is to provide 'floating support' to vulnerable individuals as a key personal contact and to signpost and support people to access health and social care services. This includes registering with a GP and support to attend acute medical appointments, and to access specialist mental health and drug and alcohol services (XXXX 2012, Bates and Freeman 2014). Resettlement services include mental health and wellbeing support groups, community cafes, drug and alcohol recovery support, informal education projects and welfare and tenancy advice (Dwyer et al. 2012, Whiteford and Byrne 2013, Bates and Freeman 2014). Smaller community and voluntary organisations, characterised as cautious contractors by Buckingham (2012) may not be able access funds to offer a personalised 'floating support' and broader resettlement services to homeless people or those at risk of homelessness. The range, availability and quality of services that aim to meet service user needs beyond accommodation and work programme compliance is effectively curtailed. Paradoxically in the context of neoliberal welfare reforms, this reduces rather than increases diversity, choice and quality in the welfare system (Lemos and Bacon 2006, Buckingham 2012).

Narratives of change: the workers' stories

Findings presented here were derived from a set of sixteen interviews with staff involved in the homelessness and resettlement service from 2011 to 2014. Interviews aimed to capture stories of change, as it happened, during the period of early austerity in England (Bourdieu et al. 1999). Representations of homelessness and resettlement service front line workers and managers are anonymised and pseudonyms are used. Analysis of interviews reveal three thematic narratives of staff experiences over time and are presented as follows: emerging realities, deletion and changing realities.

Emerging realities

Nationally, provision of homeless services was in a state of rapid change. The period leading up to the announcements of Local Authority budgets in 2011 was marked by a sense of uncertainty, driven by the insecurity that provision of services and access to welfare and benefits for homeless people was neither guaranteed nor consistent (Groundswell 2011). Homeless Link's annual Snap Shot Survey of 2011 reported that the top issue concerning organisations was funding, whist the biggest gap in provision was for moving on or resettlement services (Homeless Link 2011). News of the 2011 budget represented a severe blow for the homelessness and resettlement service as staff realised the impending implications of national changes taking effect locally on their existing services and for single homeless people. Although significant changes to welfare funding had been on government policy agendas since the recession of 2008/2009, for many organisations the reality of austerity measures announced in 2010 appeared as sudden and dramatic as explained by a manager:

> *We have to face the new reality; this is about staff, service users and services, with implications for our organisation over a long time. What seemed distant policy is here and now. While the Local Authority strategy was intended to shield services for vulnerable people, only those people with service needs defined under a statutory duty would have their needs assessed and met. (Bill, manager, 2011)*

Local responses to the changing context by organisations providing homelessness and resettlement services included sharing information about closures of local services, and tentative planning for handing over services and service users to organisations that still had funding (Homeless Link 2013). Despite some forward planning, one manger expressed a sense of emerging uncertainty and implications for service users:

> *We feel a great vulnerability for our people. Where will they get services from? What will happen to them? We have already stripped out the back office function to keep us going and to keep the front line homeless services. We can cut back on service costs etc. but we can't do that again next year. Our worst nightmare is that Supporting People takes a major hit – and the people that need these types of services will no longer get it. (Annie, manager, 2011)*

The implications of budget retraction appeared as a breach in the norms of relations between the State, Local Authorities and subsequently the community and voluntary sector (Buckingham 2012, Bunyan 2012). The community and voluntary sector had been framed since New Labour as an amenable and a largely compliant body of organisations, and best able to meet the needs of people locally (Dobson and McNeil 2011, Bunyan 2012). The sector legitimised its role through technical and operational skills and capacity to meet targets, as comfortable and compliant contractors able to operate in a market orientated welfare system (Buckingham 2012). The charity considered itself part of a group of organisationally competent providers and local funding and resources seemed secure in the short term at least. Access to future funding was dependent on internal responses to budget retraction as explained by a manager:

> *There is an expectation that organisations provide viable services but on less money. Existing terms of contracts and re-negotiations with local authorities are changing. There was a realisation that more had to be delivered, for less money, but under the same terms. (Moira, manager, 2013)*

Deletion

In common with the experiences of many community and voluntary sector organisations the changed external context impacted on internal contexts as services were reduced, terms and conditions of staff changed and ultimately jobs were lost (Homeless Link 2011). The words 'deleted' and 'deletion' circulated in conversations to describe the effect of Local Authority cuts that included cancellation of contracts that were due to end, and deletion of recent and new tenders before services provision began. Local experiences resonated with national experiences as impacts on staffing levels reduced the quantity of resettlement services and decreased the availability of networks of supports and opportunities for engagement with service users (Nichols 2011, Fitzpatrick et al. 2014). The immediate impact within the charity was on front line staff; reduction in their hours of employment and reduction in services provided and therefore the number of people they worked with. A sense of erasure and loss of professional value was expressed by a front line staff member:

> *People are not interested in homelessness and resistance to these cuts is not a priority for people. Non-statutory provision leads to reduction of services to a bare minimum. This leads to a further erosion and retraction of professional services. We have been deleted. (Joseph, front line worker, March 2011)*

As a mechanism to protect employment, managers positioned front line worker roles as generic rather than specialist. During 2011 and 2012, seven staff were redeployed to other areas of the charity in non-homelessness service roles, three staff had their hours of work reduced and one staff member moved to another organisation. As explained by a manager, attempts to maintain continuity of service in the context of reduced budgets involved difficult decisions and impacted personally and professionally on staff:

> *We have to look at any opportunities we can develop in parallel with the potential of people losing their jobs. And there are a lot of people really scared out there. We will have to think more about central purchasing and trying to make savings that way. I know people depend on us for an income so we have to look for alternatives so that staff can be flexibly assigned to other areas of the organisation. We have to be pretty creative - moving people to fill posts on an ad hoc basis. Provision of services may be reduced to a basic or non-existent level if we can't finance it. (Carmel, manager, 2012)*

Expertise in floating support and resettlement services was in danger of being lost across the community and voluntary sector (Bird 2010, Dobson and McNeill 2011). Working with homeless people was historically aligned to the mission and values of the charity and its staff. Of particular concern was that vulnerable single people with multiple forms of exclusion would be unable to obtain secure tenancies and could lose out on unique 'floating services' that are not available elsewhere (Dwyer et al. 2012, Fitzpatrick et al. 2015). As front line workers were specifically vulnerable to reduced pay and job cuts, the charity was at risk of losing knowledge and skills of staff with expertise in supporting people at risk of, or with experience of, homelessness (Maguire 2012). Professional self-concept and value based was felt to be eroded (Fletcher 2012, Dobson 2015). Precarious staff tenure and constant policy change caused additional stress when working with marginalised groups (Scanlon and Adlam 2012). A loss of professional identity and anxiety about not meeting the needs of service users was noted by a front line worker:

> *Cuts to services means a loss of very specific expertise and we won't get that back. The skill base will be diminished. Can this work be done by volunteers who don't have the capacity to work with homeless people on their journey? But when people are out on the streets they are extremely vulnerable and to work with them, that is a skilled job. (Irene, front line worker, 2012)*

Changing relations

Austerity and welfare reform had implications for relations between the community and voluntary sector and the State. Despite the charity's ability to respond by internally financing some gaps in budgets, the pervasiveness of contract and transactional cultures framed discussions about ways of working. The external context required adjustments and change to the nature of provision of services as explained by a manager:

> *The world has changed. If we focus on partnership, we can deliver good services for people. We have to offer a specialist service to the big organisations providing housing to clients like ours. We do less work with the council and we are now contracted to housing associations. (Carmel, manager, 2013)*

Changed relations with funders and other community and voluntary sector organisations offering homelessness and resettlement services, driven by new contracts, resulted in conflicted, embodied practice (Banks, 2011). Although staff maintained a value base to their work, beyond contractual motivation, new ways of working with elements of a transactional contract culture, destabilised staff self-concept of what it means to work in the community and voluntary sector (Dobson, 2011). An increased focus on delivery of target driven services created some doubt about the effectiveness of a business model of welfare as expressed by both managers and front line staff:

> *Concomitant with a Big Society agenda is for the CVS to engage in a competitive and contractual relationship with each other. Increase in rents for community based premises and the levying of service charges to other CVS organisations is becoming more commonplace. Organisations that offer advice, now charge say £50 for that advice. If everyone has to charge for services to each other that is going to impact on smaller organisations. (Annie, manager, 2012)*

> *We seem to have moved into a contractual relationship with government and each other. Not a facilitative relationship. The CVS has engaged in the project contract culture. They get the work, they do the work, and they deliver the targets. But I am not sure they provide a critique of themselves. (Veronica, front line staff, 2014)*

All staff took a position as advocates for vulnerable people in dealings with the statutory sector, and in wider advocacy networks (Fletcher, 2012; Renedo, 2014). The centrality of care, caring for and values, was noted as a recurring theme underpinning relational work in interviews. Findings illustrate how staff embodied values and strove to articulate the value base of their work during austere times. In 2012 staff reflected on the continued relevance of preventative work, despite prioritisation of crisis work implied by changes in statutory duty as explained by a staff member:

> *Social problems can't be dealt with overnight, but it is our job to tackle them by working with people to set and reach their own goals, creating a sustainable life. Our work is preventative as well. We can work with people before issues become really problematic by providing caring and consistent support services after they have been in hostels, we help them move on and settle over time. Landlords have got used to us and trust us. We prevent homelessness by ensuring people can manage themselves. We break down any revolving door system. (Joseph, front line worker, 2012)*

In 2013, staff reflected on the nature of caring services and linked their self-concept as providers of relational care staff in contrast with their role as implementers of a defined support package as explained by a front line worker:

> *All the team are caring people with values of their own that guide them in how they work. It is client led, and about working alongside our service users. We are in the background, when they are taking small steps. Our work is more community*

> *focussed. We work on empowerment and helping people make choices. The new approaches and procedures are about provision of care as a package, not care for, or caring. (Irene, front line worker, 2013)*

In 2014 staff reflected on the consequences of their changing practice for service users and identified a link between loss of services and loss care, as explained by a front line worker:

> *It is going to be very hard. The vulnerability of the people we work with who now have to engage without having an identified support worker to navigate the changes in their lives and the system. Someone who helps them plan for the future and how to go forward. They will feel the impact on themselves and how it affects their day to day life, rather than a 'loss of service'. They will describe it as a loss of 'people who care'. (Betty, front line worker, 2014)*

All staff emphasised the value base, that promoted human dignity, as underpinning the quality of their services and their relational work with vulnerable people. Front line workers expressed duty of care in terms of prioritisation of human interactions with people with complex needs (Renedo 2014, Abrahams et al. 2015). Managers focussed on the charity's organisational compliance and expressed duty of care in terms of ensuring continuity of service (Banks 2011). The community and voluntary sector needed to be seen as effective provider of services, despite a challenging funding and welfare reform context (Bunyan 2012). Austerity shifted the emphasis in welfare from examination of structural determinants of vulnerability to a deficit model of individuals (Stuckler and Basu 2013). These narratives express a sense of embodied austerity as all staff struggled with the challenges of the changing context of their work.

Conclusion: Embodied austerity

The workers' stories trace responses to austerity and welfare reforms from the eve of crisis in 2011, through periods of loss and adjustment to 2014. The perspectives of staff revealed that the extent of welfare reforms and austerity not only impacted on the charity's services, but also on personal and professional values of homelessness services staff (Groundswell 2011, Scanlon and Adlam 2012, Renedo 2014). Embodied austerity is offered as an overarching theme for this commentary of early austerity from the perspectives of homelessness and resettlement services staff. Ethics of care as relational work is under-valued during austere times and staff are positioned in conflicting and contradictory spaces as they try to contend with the implications of a rapidly changing context for their work (Banks 2011).

Embodied austerity and ethics of care

Austerity, Banks (2011, 2016) argues, has increased the tension between two dimensions of ethical practice in social care work. Ethical practice, defined as accountability, is privileged as part of new public management (Banks 2011). Ethics of care in practice, defined as embodied ethics work of emotional, identity and interactive work, formed the basis for relationships between staff and homeless people or those at risk of homelessness (Dobson 2011, Banks 2011). Ethical practice defined as ethics of care as relational work between service users and key workers in the caring services is under-resourced during times of recession (Banks 2011, 2016).

The staff of the charity, in common with many homelessness professionals in the community and voluntary sector, regulated and amended their practice within an externally changed market driven and audit context for their work (Colley 2012, Renedo 2014). From 2010 to 2014, staff at all levels of the organisation worked through a changed ethos for provision of homelessness services (Banks 2011).

As funding became subject to of a narrowly defined statutory duty, providing continuity of resettlement and homelessness services as ethical relational care conflicted with target driven approaches to project funding. Resettlement services, as preventative and sustaining work with homeless people, appeared undervalued externally. This created tensions for all staff and they endeavoured to continue relational ways of working with vulnerable people, as reflected on by a staff member:

> *We are working through some tough times; resisting, informing and creating the context in which we work. (Carmel, manger, 2014)*

Contradictory spaces

Contradictory spaces are created for front line workers in homelessness and resettlement services under neoliberal welfare systems (Stuckler and Basu 2013). Banks (1998) observes the direct ways a new managerialism culture changes social work practice and provision. The job roles of social workers are increasingly specialised and fragmented in relation to categories of social work. In addition, social and community based practice is increasingly monitored in relation to throughputs, outputs and resource management, and subject to performance measures, legislation and guidelines (Banks 1998, Fletcher 2011).

Renedo (2014) suggest that ethical practice needed for compliance and accountability inherent in new partnerships and commissioning relationships, conflicts with equally important ethical practice at relational level. Meeting diverse needs of service users on an individualised basis may be more difficult in austere times (Renedo 2014).

The changed funding and policy context for homelessness and resettlement services destabilised workers' self-concept as providers of relational care (Dobson, 2011). Staff were conscious of the contradictions in making changes to current models out of necessity in reduced circumstances, while at the same time to try to hold onto the organisations' values, as expressed by a staff member:

> *What we are in danger of losing here is a sense of accompanying people and a sense of social justice. This is rooted in our history. We have the ability to respond, to follow a story rather than follow the funding. We need to keep faithful to people and make sure we have enduring quality, although the model may change. There will be internal and external changes. But we must hold onto our values. (Carmel, manager, 2014)*

A common story?

In conclusion, the workers' stories presented in this paper resonate with, and may be illustrative of, a common story across caring services in England during austere times (Benozzo and Colley 2012). Austerity changed the nature of the homelessness and resettlement service provision within the charity, a common situation reported nationally (Homeless Link, 2011). The combination of cuts to Local Authority budgets and Supporting

People funds raised concerns about possible reductions in the availability, type and nature of community and voluntary organisations involved in the provision of services to homeless people and those at risk of homelessness (Bird 2010). The value of homelessness and resettlement services was undermined by the erosion of funding and statutory requirements for such work (Buckingham 2012). A sense of the ethical and relational caring roles between staff and homeless people or those at risk of homelessness was undervalued (Fletcher 2011, Limebury and Shea 2015). Criteria for commissioning has shifted towards compliance, auditing and generalist provision of housing placement, rather than specialised small scale resettlement or homelessness services based on personal outcomes (Buckingham 2012). External and internal relations were breached mirroring the increasingly conditional, compliant and transactional nature of welfare provision in times of budget retraction (Bird 2010, Buckingham 2012, Whiteford and Simpson 2015). Market driven approaches to welfare policy narrowly define ethics of care and practice. Inflexible guidelines for practice and criteria that defines success in output and throughput targets, and that are measured though auditing processes are increasing for caring services (Banks, 2011, Stuckler and Basu 2013). These conditions create mechanisms of social control in the spheres of social welfare, employment, health, education and in community relations (Banks 1998, Banks 2011, Bunyan, 2012, Stuckler and Basu 2013).

The extent of the seismic changes to the social contract and potential impact of early austerity and welfare reform was not underestimated in 2010 (Gelder 2011). However, the rolling nature of reform and financial cuts created uncertainty and concern about the full impacts on local arrangements for homelessness services and provision to come in future years (Bird 2010, Gelder 2011). The speed and scale at which reform and funding cuts were implemented left many in the homelessness statutory and community and voluntary sector unprepared strategically and financially (Johnson and Vickery 2011, Buckingham 2012, Homeless Link 2013). The capacities of the community and voluntary sector to form new ways of working across new relationships continue to be tested in this rapidly changing and challenging context (Vickery 2012).

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