



Big Society briefing

April 2011

Introduction

The Big Society is described as David Cameron's passion it formed a central theme to the Conservative election campaign and is a defining policy of the Coalition Government. Providers in the housing care and support sector report finding it difficult to get to grips with what it means, and the implication for both their organisations and those who use their services. Outlined below is a brief summary of the ideology, the challenges, how it is being translated into action by the Government and what it might mean for housing related support providers.

What is the Big Society?

The vision of the Big Society is *giving individuals and communities more control over their destinies*¹. It can be described as having five elements

- Giving communities more control – enabling communities have the power to take decision and share their area the Localism Bill² outlines that communities can bid for community assets and have more say over planning decisions
- Encouraging people to play a more active role in their communities - the Giving Green paper³ suggests that people will be able to take part in an e-bay style on line community, trading their time
- Transfer of power from central to local Government this has been the focus of the Coalition Government reform freeing localities from Whitehall dictate
- Increased role of not for profit organisation enabling charities, private business, social enterprises and employee owned co-operatives to compete to offer people high quality public services
- Publish Government data – central Government want to move away from bureaucracy toward transparency. They recognise there is little point in giving people the right to challenge, communities power without enabling them to have a full appreciation of what local government are doing and how much it is costing for example Local Authorities being required to publish all expenditure over £500.

Challenges

The Big Society represents a culture change it is seen as moving society from being the passive recipient of services to playing an active part in building *our broken society*⁴ through a combination of community activism and contributing time and money. Its principles inform Government policy across all departments. It is difficult to argue with the ethos however in the current climate of sever cuts to public services and welfare reform there have been criticisms levied at the Big Society

- The voluntary sector organisations who have provided the framework for community involvement and voice are in danger of disappearing as state funding is cut, people cannot afford to donate and corporate giving has not got off the ground
- A significant proportion of those using and requiring housing related support services are less able to take part and benefit without support
- Proposed changes to the Welfare system are designed to ensure to get people into work not volunteering
- Volunteering requires an infrastructure and those voluntary organisations that provide volunteering opportunities are experiencing losing funding
- The prospect of bidding to provide public services will be too late for voluntary organisations who do not survive the current austere environment.

¹ David Cameron July 2010.

² <http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2010-11/localism.html>

³ www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/resource-library/giving-green-paper

⁴ David Cameron February 2011.

- In the drive for economies of scale and greater efficiencies smaller specialised or local voluntaries organisations will not be able to compete with larger organisation and the private sector

Government action

The Big Society initiative is being led by the Cabinet Office, although its philosophy is cross departmental moving power away from the centre to the local. Francis Maude Secretary of State for the Cabinet Office chairs the Government Committee on the Big Society, Minister for Civil Society; Nick Hurd is responsible for Charities, Social Enterprises and Voluntary Organisations in the Cabinet Office. He is also known as the Minister for Civil Society and is focusing on increasing resources and making it easier to run voluntary organisations, and for them to work with the State. Lord Nat Wei is the House of Lords advisor and responsible for cross Government implementation.

The emerging tangible elements of the Government Big Society include:

The Big Society Bank – a social investment wholesale bank using monies from dormant bank accounts with two roles investing and championing the social investment market. The former is not to invest in front line social ventures but to invest in products developed by social venture intermediaries for example social impact bonds or social ISAs that can be used by front line organisations. The latter could involve advising Government on opportunities to open public services to social ventures.

Big Society Network⁵ – not for profit organisation designed to support organisations in delivering the practical elements of civil engagement. The Network aims to showcase initiatives, create e-dialogue on the elements of the Big Society and enable sharing of learning. The Network is responsible for an initiative that is piloting the Council giving community groups, charities and local residents control over part of the Local Authority budget.

Community First Fund which replaces Grassroots Grants fund supporting small charities and community organisations. Community First Fund will award £30 million in grants to small organisations and offer £50 million match funding for local endowments over the next 4 years.

National Citizen Service aims to help young people aged 16 acquire the skills and experience to become responsible and active citizens. 12 pilots will be running activities that take place over the summer holidays.

Four vanguard communities – Maidenhead and Windsor, Eden Valley Cumbria, Sutton and originally Liverpool who has subsequently pulled out. The Local Authorities are taking forward initiatives that are expected embrace Big Society principles, for example, taking over a community pub, local participatory budget setting and installing broadband in rural communities. The communities are receiving targeted and tailored help from the Government to reduce bureaucracy allowing more decisions to be taken locally.

Army of community organisers who will be paid in their first year and trained over 4 years to encourage social action and ensure that individuals are supported in participating in decision making and shaping local services. They will identify local leaders and bring together local communities to start neighbourhood groups that can resolve problems and inspire activity from the bottom up.

The voluntary sector

Given one of the tenets of the Big Society is increasing the role of the voluntary sector the Office for Civil Society within the Cabinet Office published a strategy for voluntary groups, charities and social enterprises *Building a Stronger Civil Society*⁶. The strategy sets out the opportunities that are available to the sector through opening up public services and promoting social action for example

⁵ <http://thebigsociety.co.uk/>

⁶ <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/sites/default/files/resources/building-stronger-civil-society.pdf>

the right to challenge, some of the practical measures the Government are proposing for example reducing red tape for small organisations and developing a community fund making it easier for people to donate to charities for example when paying their restaurant bill. The strategy also talks about renewing the compact with new measures to improve transparency and accountability and developing a successful partnership programme to support the creation of strong relationships between local public bodies and the voluntary sector.

How the sector can respond to the Big Society

The Big Society is clearly here to stay and most organisations in the housing care and support sector will already be delivering services and working in a way that fit with its ethos and philosophy. It may just require a change of terminology to demonstrate that a project is building the big society and that staff are 'community leaders' for the service users they provide services to. Here are a few practical ways organisations can embed the principles of the Big Society.

Funding

Organisations should be investigating the potential for private donations that have the potential to be matched funded from the state and formal sources, for example, grant giving trusts:

- Private donations the more local the better which could include local shops, schools and businesses to become their nominated charity
- On line giving, for example, through the website or links through social networking sites
- Enabling donations and donors (where appropriate) to be visible in the Annual Report on the website and in Newsletter, for example, £200 raised from the Merrygold restaurant giving scheme was matched funded by the Brown foundation which paid for three workshops on life skills for 60 young people.

Volunteering

Organisation should review arrangements for volunteering looking at their policies and how they can support volunteering. Housing, care and support organisations have an enormous potential to offer volunteering opportunities but also support service users engage in volunteering. Arrangements where individuals or local businesses volunteer their time skills and experience can also be used as match funding in kind when making funding applications.

Demonstrating that service users are involved in volunteering activities can evidence that service users are participating in their community and being active citizens.

Organisations should collaborate with other organisations to enable support wider volunteering activities; research has demonstrated that voluntary organisations often provide volunteering opportunities for their own service and ex service users but not for others. Joining or even setting up a volunteering network with other providers would be useful to enable service users to find more opportunities to use and develop their skills.

Collaboration

In order to embed the principles of the Big Society especially responding to opportunities to provide public services organisations should explore the advantages that collaboration can bring. Working together with another or other providers can provide efficiencies sharing backroom function, economies of scale but also enable the provision of a wider range of activities.

Community engagement

Housing support and care organisations can support community engagement and social activism in a number of ways

- Ensuring that service users are able to play their full part in the community and seize opportunities to participate in local decisions
- Service users participating in all levels of decision making within the service demonstrating that the organisation replicates the ethos of Big Society that control is devolved as far as possible to those who are impacted by these decisions
- Being the voice piece of the local community and enabling services to offer opportunities to enable the wider community to come together, for example, hosting neighbourhood meetings
- Opening up services for the wider community, for example, using staff skills to run advice surgeries, allowing rooms to be used by other community groups, allowing computer equipment to be used etc.

Social enterprise

Organisations should consider whether they can set up a social enterprise for example a community interest company. The most common example of this is setting up a local café, which can be used for community meeting, providers volunteering opportunities and raises money that can be reinvested into the organisations. Other examples include holding exercise classes, internet café, selling items on ebay, second hand book sales and car valeting. For more ambitious organisations this may be a vehicle through which they can exercise their right to challenge to provide public services.

Sitra

Sitra is a national membership organisation committed to raising standards in the housing, care and support sector. We are a charity with over 25 years' experience of offering a range of affordable policy, training, consultancy, information, conference and capacity building services. We have some 650 member organisations, from both providers and commissioners and from the statutory, voluntary and private sectors.

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