

2

Children, Young People & Families and the Big Society

Context

A primary element of Big Society thinking has been the encouragement of citizens to take a more active role in their communities. Within this strand is the proposal to develop a National Citizens Service, targeted at young people (16 year olds) to develop a culture and ethos of community participation within our young people.

This document considers the role that the VCS currently plays in supporting and encouraging active participation of children, young people and their families (CYP&F) in their communities and some of the challenges facing young people in engaging with the Big Society approach.

Case study

Derbyshire VCI Passport



The Derbyshire VCI (voluntary, community and independent sector) Passport is a volunteer development programme designed to equip volunteers from 16yrs+ with the knowledge and skills to enable them to work safely and effectively with children and young people in their communities.

The project is a partnership between Derbyshire County Council, the district councils, volunteer centres, volunteers and many volunteer engaging organisations such as cadets, Homestart and the Youth Offending Team.

Volunteers attend a structured training programme covering 5 modules:

1. Health & Safety
2. Equal Opportunities
3. Safeguarding
4. First Aid
5. Involving and consulting young people

At the end of the programme volunteers develop an action plan for implementation in their own communities which they present to their local Parish Council for future support. In addition they receive a CRB check and are presented with the VCI Passport, which is valid for 3 years and is recognised by partners as a quality assurance allowing them to work with young and vulnerable people.

The project targets development of young volunteers with qualifications below level 2 and is accredited by OCN. In addition to skills development, evaluation of the project has also evidenced growth in confidence building, team work, safeguarding and practical activity to support community development and cohesion as a result of the programme. To date 20 of the 200 participants have also secured work as a result of the project.

Derbyshire VCI Passport is jointly funded by Derbyshire County Council, district authority contributions and additional resource from the volunteer centres. Delivery of the project costs between £75 and £100 per participant.

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East Midlands Dimension

The 2001 census shows a total East Midlands population of 4.3m and is expected to rise to 4.8m by 2028 making the East Midlands the fastest growing population outside the South of England. However, population growth has concentrated in rural and suburban areas with the primary cities of Nottingham, Leicester and Derby seeing population decline. As the third most rural region there has been an acceleration of ageing in the population as a whole which has led to the closure of schools and services, particularly across the rural parts of the region.

Child poverty in the East Midlands remains roughly in line with national averages at 18.4% (2008). However, the proportion of children in poverty living in 'in-work' families has grown; reflecting the economic climate of low skill, low pay in the East Midlands. The hardship of recession is likely to further increase poverty across the region, but children can't wait.

There are an estimated 10,000 VCS groups working on CYP&F issues across the East Midlands. These groups coordinate regionally through the VCS Engage network supported by Children's Links with three broad outcomes:-

- Increased engagement of the VCS: promoting partnerships and networks across and between the VCS and other sectors, extending network support to an increasing number of diverse groups.
- Increased representation and influence: strengthening the voice of the sector in the region and achieving policy change at local and regional level.
- Building VCS capacity: increasing the range and quality of children and young people VCS services regionally and locally.

VCS Engage East Midlands brokers the relationship between VCS groups working in the field of CYP&F with local and regional stakeholders who need to engage with the VCS for successful service delivery and integration. This diverse membership enables opportunity for local, regional and national networking and influence. Nationally the programme, through its parent funder Children England, works closely with DfE and policy development.

A focus group held in November 2010 identified the following as key elements to a 'Big Society' future for children, young people and families:

- **young people play an active role in taking responsibility for their communities and for each other**
- **young people have access to the services that support them to grow and develop**
- **good practice in involving young people in service design and decision making is common place**
- **those young people who are seldom heard are supported to engage**
- **families have access to living wages**
- **training and education builds opportunity and aspiration**
- **young people are safe**

True engagement of young people in Big Society will depend upon speed and flexibility in the system. Localisation and community influence over local decision making is a valuable element of the Big Society and one which will be likely to lead to tangible improvements in service design and local outcomes. However, if the process of community engagement is long and bureaucratic then changes will be slow to appear and communities will fast lose interest. For young people, who grow and develop quickly, this issue is highly pertinent. Rapid needs assessments followed by a swift response must be achieved if our young people are to feel part of shaping and developing our communities.

Big Society must be for all young people, not just those most able to engage. Much VCS activity with young people focuses on supporting those most vulnerable, disadvantaged or at risk in society. Big Society must embrace and engage all young people to be successful but some young people will require support. The Youth Parliament has been effective in raising the concept of the need to engage and ‘hear’ the views of young people. However, in practice it is a ‘top-down’ model which distills young people down to the most informed, able and articulate in performing a representational role. New ways of engaging young people, building on the supportive expertise of VCS groups, must be developed.

Big Society is already in action. There are many VCS examples of intergenerational activity, young volunteering programmes, peer mentoring by young people and work which supports voice from those young people who are seldom heard. The VCS is excellent at providing a vehicle for the flexibility and innovation demanded by young people. The scale of local activity with young people also supports other parts of the community through the use of community amenities an engagement in sport and cultural heritage activities. If it is working now at local level, don’t fix it.

Recipe for success

For Big Society to succeed for young people we must collectively build a relationship between communities, the VCS and the public and private sectors which embeds the core principles of:

- **Safeguarding**
- **Participation and engagement of young people**
- **Addressing inequality and celebrating diversity**

Impact of National Policy

The principle policy driver for work with CYP&F is the **Childrens Act 2004** which crystallised the approaches embedded within **Every Child Matters** and led to creation of local partnerships and safeguarding boards and the production of local children and young people’s plans. The principle being to work in partnership, both statutory and non statutory to improve outcomes for CYP&F. Policy in this area is focused on the primary aim of safeguarding young people and developing their wellbeing. Whilst there is acceptance that safeguarding processes can be extremely inhibiting to community activity with young people, any reduction in bureaucracy relating to safeguarding (e.g. removal of vetting and barring scheme) must be undertaken carefully.

The **2008 Duty to Involve** requires public bodies to undertake meaningful engagement with communities on issues which impact on them. To date the Duty to Involve has been subject to many and varied interpretations at local level and has not given sufficient weight to the voice of young people in contributing to service delivery. The **2010 Equalities Act** makes ‘age’ one of the ‘protected categories’ in law, so that no-one may be discriminated against because of their age. The Act could be used constructively alongside the Duty to Involve and the **Compact** to ensure that the voices of young people are embedded in local decision making.

There is substantial information about the variable success of mainstream education in meeting the needs of minority groups, for example the consistent underperformance of male African Caribbeans when compared to white or Asian males from the same age group. **Free Schools** bring an opportunity to create a learning environment more appropriate for these young people to thrive. However it is unrealistic to assume that communities with endemic underperformance will have capacity to develop Free Schools without support and capacity building. This has been demonstrated by the first wave of approved Free Schools which have not seen good representation from disadvantaged groups but have been taken up by communities with lower disadvantage and greater capacity. Unless addressed this is likely to increase inequality in education rather than decrease it.

The **Extended Schools** programme has been highly successful at a local level in maximising the use of services which support young people and families and create an environment which will support working families. Extended Schools are seen by the VCS as supporting local partnerships and enabling the Big Society. Continued investment in Extended Schools provision will deliver Big Society objectives.

The incorporation of emotional wellbeing and community engagement within the **OFSTED Framework** has been an effective driver in building links between schools and the community. The framework approach was supported by the findings of the **2010 Marmot Review** which concluded that health and wellbeing is driven by relative socioeconomic status. To increase wellbeing we must work collectively towards achieving:

- an enabling society that maximises individual and community potential.
- social justice, health and sustainability at the heart of all policies.

The **Child Poverty Act 2010** provides a primary focus to eradicate poverty by 2020. The statutory duty for local authorities to publish their Child Poverty Strategy by March 2011 is an opportunity to ensure that an approach based purely on income is not used and to focus instead on the kind of society we want. VCS and community engagement in the development of Child Poverty Strategies allow for the consideration of wider society's issues and will ensure that Big Society is effective and poverty eliminated. Recent pilots (Rights – Respecting schools - Unicef) demonstrated societies in miniature, showing us that where there were profound values and respect for one another, improved outcomes such as community cohesion and sense of duty were paramount.