

Big Society

Constraints and Potentials





Introduction

This is the first in a series of Clinks discussion papers that aims to inform Clinks Members and to stimulate debate of the issues that are expected to feature heavily in the new coalition Government's rehabilitation Green Paper, due for publication in November 2010.

This paper explores the new coalition Government's concept of Big Society and what it may mean for Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations working with offenders.

Clinks would like to invite you to participate in this debate. As a voluntary organisation working with offenders, what would help you become more involved in a local 'rehabilitation revolution'? See the end of this paper for further details.



Other Clinks papers in this series will cover:

- **Localising Justice:** how can we increase VCS involvement in service design and delivery?
- **Payment by results:** What does it mean for voluntary organisations working with offenders?
- **Innovative services for a rehabilitation revolution:** What could go to market?
- **A new focus on measuring outcomes:** Where do we start?



The coalition Government and Big Society

The Big Society was identified as a key strand of the Conservative Party vision leading into the election in May, 2010. At that point the concept was not particularly well-developed other than as a vision that contrasted with the Big State. Since then, further work undertaken by the Coalition Government, and a number of think tanks has begun to further articulate what Big Society entails. The Cabinet Office published 'Building the Big Society'¹ in which it cites 5 key elements of the Big Society:

1. Giving communities more powers. This includes a commitment to recruit and train up to 5,000 community organisers. It will also give local areas greater say in local planning decisions. Finally, it also includes a commitment to allow local organisations to take over and deliver certain public services.
2. Encouragement for citizens to become involved in their communities. This includes support to engage in volunteering and a national 'Big Society Day'. Young people will have the opportunity to take up a National Citizen Service. There will be initiatives to increase charitable giving and philanthropic activity.
3. Transfer of power from central to local government. This includes providing local government with greater financial autonomy as well as a 'power of competence'. This basically means that local authorities could undertake any lawful activities which promoted and responded to the best interests of local residents. They wouldn't be constrained by only being able to act if there was specific statutory authority to do so.
4. Support for mutuals, co-ops, charities, and social enterprises. These non-profit organisations will be supported and encouraged to take over the running of public services. Public sector workers themselves will be helped to form employee-owned charities and be able to more independently deliver services. New funding for increasing capacity in the voluntary sector will come from dormant bank accounts—a Big Society Bank.
5. Publish government data. This involves giving the public access to government 'data-sets' including information about crime at the local level in order that the police can held accountable for their delivery.

Key questions

- Are there other issues that should form part of the Big Society platform?
- How would access to government data help to improve service delivery by the VCS?
- What are the implications for democracy and accountability?



In June, 2010, the New Economics Foundation (NEF) published 'Ten Big Questions about the Big Society'². The main thesis of the paper is that, while there is much to support in the Big Society concept there are a number of structural issues in the British economy and society that need to be addressed in order to make these aspirations real.

These include:

- a fairer distribution of wealth and opportunity,
- a better balance between work and leisure,
- investment in local organisations and voluntary sector bodies to increase their capacity to deliver some of the public services currently provided by the state,
- and a different approach to the relationship between professionals and users of services.

It also argues that there remains a role for the state in addressing the problems of poverty and unemployment, and for the state to have a strategic role in planning for a long-term sustainable economy and democracy.

Much of what is discussed by commentators as being key elements of the Big Society is not new and carries forward developments already set in train by the previous administration. Third Sector Research Centre identify some of these continuities and state that much needs to be done to transform the policy aspirations into achievable specific delivery.³

Local freedom and powers

The Big Society envisages the solutions to social, economical, and environmental problems arising from the ideas and actions of local people, in neighbourhoods and localities, rather than in centralised top-down fashion.

This has led to the swift removal of many targets that were intended to drive improvements in public services and local government performance. Instead it is expected that greater democratic accountability at a local level will enhance services and ensure that they meet the identified needs of local people.

To support this approach, the government will make it easier for citizens to form organisations to deliver these services, or indeed, take over the running of post offices, pubs, etc

Key questions

- What are the opportunities for organisations working with offenders and their families that might come from these freedoms? ‘
- Does the removal of national targets represent a threat to developing services for ‘unpopular groups’?



Local Referendums

As part of the move to empower local communities, Big Society provides the opportunity for local referendums on key issues.

The proposal is that these referendums could be triggered by petitions regarding local issues that are supported by 5% of local citizens within a 6 month period.

There doesn't appear to be any guidance at this point as to what kinds of issues could be subject to a referendum.

Key questions

- Are there currently services for offenders and their families that might be under threat from local views reflected in referendums?
- Is there potential for recruiting support at the local level for services to vulnerable groups and getting the local authority to prioritise them?
- Will the campaigning role of the VCS going to be more relevant in this new environment?

Public Sector Reform

The drive to reduce the deficit will mean significant reductions in public sector funding and this, in turn, is expected to influence how public services are delivered.

Across a number of fronts, the government is keen to help public sector staff to form their own 'charities' and thus be in a stronger position to determine how they will provide services.

There is potential here for a greater involvement of users in the design and delivery of services but there will need to be incentives to do so.

Key questions

- What kinds of statutory criminal justice services could reasonably be considered for transferring to the VCS in this way?
- What scope is there for transforming the way that criminal justice services could be delivered?
- How can service user involvement be incentivised throughout this process?



Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS)

It would appear that much will be expected of the VCS in the development of the Big Society.

Although the government hasn't articulated the Sector's role in 'filling the gap' caused by the reduction of in public services it is clear that VCS organisations are already experiencing increases in work load as a result of the economic downturn.

More positively, the Sector is seen as one of the main vehicles for citizens to become more involved in civic society, as well as delivering a greater range of services. In particular, there is encouragement for people to become involved in volunteering on a much greater scale.

To support this, there will be a review of the bureaucratic barriers that constrain some volunteering, and there is a planned Big Society Day which will promote and celebrate volunteering.

Key questions

- What are the most important barriers to volunteer recruitment and involvement?
- Are there limits to what can be expected of volunteers in delivering services and what criteria are needed to determine the differentiation between volunteers and professionals regarding public service delivery?
- How can a Big Society Day be made relevant at a local neighbourhood level?

What are the constraints to realising the Big Society?

Individual Capacity As mentioned previously, in order for citizens to become more involved they will need time free from the demands of work and family. Britain's work/life balance is characterised by a 'long hours' culture. High achieving managers and executives work long hours to meet demanding targets in both the public and private sectors.

It is not unusual for both partners in a marriage to work in order to finance large mortgages and maintain a middle class lifestyle. Low wage earners work long hours in order to supplement their poor remuneration.

There is also the difficulties experienced by those who are unemployed and claim benefits, as they must demonstrate their availability for taking up employment and are constrained from committing to anything other than evening and weekend volunteering.

Finally, the constraints faced by individuals in deprived areas could result in communities of greatest need, and those that would benefit most from increased volunteering will lose out.

Reduced revenue Recent figures indicate that the VCS rely on public sector investment for almost 40% of its income. For some organisations the figure can be as high as 80% and more.

Local authorities and other public sector bodies need to make drastic savings in expenditure. Terminating contracts with VCS organisations is a much quicker and easier method to reduce costs than making public sector staff redundant.



This is exacerbated by the impact of the economic downturn on the investment income of charitable trusts, making it more difficult to successfully apply for grants.

Scaling up Notwithstanding the extraordinary growth in the VCS over the past twelve years, it still comprises only 2.4% of the total UK work force. There will be a big challenge to transfer the delivery of public services to the VCS at the speed and the quantity that is implied in government statements.

The plans to use revenue from dormant bank accounts (Big Society Bank) to 'kick start' social enterprises and charities are ambitious, especially as recent estimates indicate that only about £60 million will be immediately available.

The loan repayments on FutureBuilders' investments will be used to finance the activities of the proposed 5,000 community organisers. This could provide much needed income to many grass roots community development agencies. It is expected, however, that these posts will subsequently be self-financing.

Key questions

- What broader social policy changes might be needed to make the Big Society a reality?
- To what extent will VCS organisations have to find alternative financial models in order to 'scale-up' their activities and services? What are the risks?
- Will the Big Society vision inevitably mean a reduction in resources for the VCS and what messages can be given to government to mitigate the effects of this?

What does Big Society mean for Clinks members?

Clinks members and other VCS organisations in the Criminal Justice System are already delivering the Big Society. Member organisations are predominantly small and locally based and rely heavily on volunteers in one form or another.

There are over 1,500 organisations that work with offenders and their families, and it is conservatively estimated that there are over 7,000 volunteers involved in the Criminal Justice System.

A significant number of VCS organisations are contracted to deliver resettlement and rehabilitation services to offenders in prisons and in the community. Many more are engaging with offenders as part of their service delivery to a wide range of vulnerable individuals.

The experience of working within the regional commissioning structure of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) has been mixed for our part of the Sector, and it has been acknowledged that these arrangements have disadvantaged small local organisations.

The Big Society, however, has a strong focus on local, and indeed neighbourhood and ward, level activity and decision making, and this clearly has potential for increasing the role and impact of small and medium sized VCS organisations.

The Ministry of Justice has already signalled that it will be cutting up to £2 billion from its budget over the next 3 to 4 years. Hence, there will be fewer prison officers, probation officers, and many courts will be closed down.



Police numbers will also be reduced and the combination of all these reductions will require new ways of responding to crime and addressing the needs of offenders.

One of the ways that this will be seen is the removal of arbitrary and often self-defeating targets (one of the key messages of the coalition government), and a greater freedom for local people and organisations to define what success looks like.

But, of course, there will also need to be a renewed emphasis on prevention and diverting potential offenders away from crime. This is essentially about creating communities where fewer people are marginalised and disempowered, and more people have a stake in society, regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity.

And it is here that the VCS can make the greatest contribution; with its service user focus and its belief in developing healthy and productive relationships between ‘helper’ and ‘helped’.

The ability and willingness of the sector to be flexible and to negotiate and broker the engagement between users and the institutions and services they require for successful rehabilitation and reintegration will be increasingly valued.

Key questions

- Can you provide examples of successful ‘co-production’ of services in the criminal justice part of the VCS?
- What are the key elements of an effective ‘broker role’ for public sector professionals?
- What kinds of national targets might be important to retain in order to ensure equity across the country for offenders and their families?

Conclusion

The Big Society represents both opportunities and risks for VCS organisations working with offenders and their families.

A smaller state could mean less protection for the weak and vulnerable, and a risk that local communities will have more scope for turning away from those that struggle to remain in the mainstream.

Less regulation and enforcement of minimum standards of service could result in poor and discriminatory provision.

However, the history of the sector has been characterised by a set of values that include fairness, justice, and equality that has not been driven by government directives.

If the Big Society can create conditions for the voice of the VCS to be more clearly heard then the challenge is to ensure that the sector has the capacity and commitment to respond.

It is also critical that the sector builds networks and alliances in order to avoid fragmentation and competition that has undermined effectiveness in the past.

Report by:

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Clinks | August 2010

How to contribute to this debate

Clinks would be very interested to know how you think the ideas behind the Big Society and their implementation will affect your organisation, so that we can incorporate your views into our feedback to Government, to inform the rehabilitation Green Paper.

To contribute to this debate, please email your views and ideas to malcolm.thomson@clinks.org



About Clinks

Clinks supports the Voluntary and Community Sector working with offenders in England and Wales.

Clinks aims to ensure the Sector and all those with whom it works, are informed and engaged in order to transform the lives of offenders. It does this through:

- Providing representation and voice
- Promoting the Sector
- Influencing policy and campaigning
- Providing information and publications
- Running training and events
- Providing services and support
- Undertaking research and development.

It is a membership charity with a network of over 4,500 people working to support the rehabilitation of offenders.



References

1. Cabinet Office (2010) 'Building the Big Society'
<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/407789/building-big-society.pdf>
2. New Economics Foundation (2010) 'Ten Big Questions about the Big Society'
http://www.neweconomics.org/sites/neweconomics.org/files/Ten_Big_Questions_about_the_Big_Society.pdf
3. Third Sector Research Centre (2010) 'Big society or civil society? A new policy environment for the third sector' <http://www.tsrc.ac.uk/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=PwhvBXnPGAU%3d&tabid=716>