

The Big Society and The Voluntary Sector

Introduction

The **Big Society** is not a new concept to voluntary organisations. Community action, using volunteers and coming together to offer solutions to problems for vulnerable people is what we have been doing for quite literally hundreds of years. What we face now is doing more of it with fewer resources.

The Comprehensive Spending Review outlined plans to increase delivery by the voluntary sector of services across adult social care, early years, community health services, youth services and early interventions for families in greatest need.

This Brief looks at the opportunities and challenges for both the Voluntary Sector and public sector colleagues as we examine the possibilities for building the **Big Society** against a very austere background.

The Big Society - Behind the Rhetoric

The **Big Society** has three key elements:

- Promoting social action - encouraging people to do things in their communities
- Empowering local communities – giving groups new rights to bid for public service contracts and take over buildings and other community assets
- Opening up public sector contracts – giving the Voluntary Sector a greater role in delivering public services

The assumption behind much of what has been said seems to be that if Government just 'gets out of the way', then individuals and communities will spring into action and take over, organising to support vulnerable people and improve their communities, taking on management of local assets and running public services. There is a tremendous amount of wonderful community action already taking place, but in truth, volunteering figures have remained static for some years. Those of us who work in the voluntary sector are well aware that volunteers come and go, and those who go soonest are those who do not receive good quality training and support. Without real investment in the infrastructure that

recruits, supports and trains volunteers, the numbers of people coming forward and remaining in voluntary work are unlikely to increase.

The 'right' to bid to run public services has been in existence for some years, but the vast majority of voluntary organisations are not of the size or scale to enter into tendering processes unless they are part of a larger consortium or working as subcontractors. Large contracts are open to national or even international competition. National bodies can show economies of scale and can deliver excellent services. However, when they move in to scoop up local contracts, they often cut out local organisations, threatening their viability and leaving in their wake a much diminished local voluntary sector.

Village halls in many areas are already in the hands of local communities and operate with varying degrees of success and struggle in the hands of dedicated local volunteers. The danger inherent in the opportunity to take over community assets is that those that are shed by public bodies are frequently offered because they are, or are about to become, liabilities.

BIG SOCIETY BRIEF

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Big Society Briefs are short, practical, thought-provoking summaries intended for busy managers and available to TCI members

Convincing the Voluntary Sector

A survey carried out by Third Sector Online and the Local Government Chronicle and published on 19th October showed that 33% of the Voluntary Sector respondents believed that the **Big Society** will never become established (22% of principal councils and 21% of local councils shared this view). 59% of Voluntary Sector respondents, 47% of principal councils and 38% of local councils thought that the main consequence of **Big Society** will be "little change, but with fewer council services and no increases in citizen activity".

“There are few signs that those involved in making cuts understand the importance of protecting our sector and its vital work in supporting communities and beneficiaries. The Coalition promised fairness in this process. How will that be achieved if the sector has its funding slashed?”

Stephen Bubb, CEO ACEVO 'Bubb's Blog'
September 2010

It is inevitable that **Big Society** has become enmeshed with public sector spending cuts and the notion that the Voluntary Sector can and will provide cheaper services to fill the gaps.

There is a sense of a lack of understanding by Government of how the voluntary and community sector works. The key feature of this misunderstanding is the apparent belief that

voluntary organisations can almost magically gather up funding from sources unavailable to public bodies. It is true that they are able to access funds from grant-making trusts, but it is also the case that, as they rely on the interest generated from their investments, they are facing the 'perfect storm' of the collapse of interest rates and ever increasing demand as public funds dry up. Voluntary organisations are cost effective in delivering services, but don't operate free of cost. If there is no sustainable core funding to pay for public bodies to deliver public services, then there is none for the Voluntary Sector to deliver them, either. The provision of essential support to the most vulnerable people requires consistency and reliability that cannot be attained by short term charitable funding, nor by reliance on the use of willing, but not constantly available volunteers.

The most far-sighted public bodies have already begun to engage with the Voluntary Sector to talk about options under the **Big Society** agenda and the effect of forthcoming cuts. Their discussions are enabling voluntary organisations to be part of shaping the difficult decisions about how the cuts should fall whilst having the least impact on those reliant on services and to offer ideas and solutions for new ways of meeting local needs. This dialogue and communication are vital. Too often, public bodies have taken the 'don't tell the children' approach to conveying difficult news to the Voluntary Sector, which has led to anger and resentment when the bad news arrives. If positive and open dialogue can happen, the Voluntary Sector can be a real ally.

50% of Voluntary Sector respondents believe that 'increased social action among citizens' will be the main element of the Big Society

Local Government Chronicle and Third Sector
Survey Sep/Oct 2010

Where Does the Big Society Come In?

Taking on board the Coalition Government's view that 'we're all in this together', the **Big Society** should not be about public bodies handing over some key responsibilities for services and assets to the Voluntary Sector and closing the doors. **There is a greater need for partnership and the combining of resources now than ever before.** The Voluntary Sector and community action is nothing new, but by dressing it up in the new title of '**The Big Society**' there is a real risk of creating a vacuum and a consequent rush to fill it. There is nothing listed in local strategies or project lists that comes under the heading of '**The Big Society**', so the tendency is to feel the need to divert what little funding is available into 'innovative' projects to fill the void. Far

more effective is to look at what the real needs in communities are, to find out what's already there helping to meet those needs and to try to make those projects sustainable. Where there is simply not enough resource to sustain everything, coming together as public bodies and Voluntary Sector organisations to look at what can be done in partnership must be the optimum way forward.

Where there is funding to be bid for the provision of public services, encouraging local Voluntary Sector organisations to come together to bid in partnerships, consortia or as lead and sub-contractors keeps money and jobs in the local economy and ensures the sustainability of a thriving and diverse Voluntary Sector that is the very fabric of **The Big Society**.

“That is not to say Government should not encourage and empower community engagement; it should, but it's something that requires concerted action between the third sector, state and communities. And it must be based on the reality of the lives of citizens not a romantic notion of civic participation, particularly at a time of state retrenchment.”

Stephen Bubb, CEO, ACEVO 'Bubb's Blog' October 2010

Four Suggestions that are do-able NOW!

- ❑ Public bodies to engage in dialogue and partnership with the local Voluntary Sector to plan together around the application of spending cuts and the alternative provision that can be put in place to build the **Big Society**.
- ❑ Voluntary Sector organisations to provide evidence that their activity is the fundamental fabric of the **Big Society** and is already delivering vital support
- ❑ Public bodies to take account of what Voluntary Sector services already exist, offering essential support in the community, and to seek to sustain these services.
- ❑ Not to be fooled by giving the old idea of community action the new name of **The Big Society** and feeling that new projects need to be devised to meet this 'new' agenda, rather than looking to see what's already there.

Conclusions

Birmingham University's NGO's in Britain Project paper '*Civic Participation and Social Responsibility*', published in September of this year, shows that the **Big Society** is built on the false premise that the voluntary sector has been 'crowded out' by government or by the Welfare State. In truth, civic participation has remained static since 1945, therefore the Government merely 'getting out of the way' is not going to magically produce increased activity by communities and voluntary organisations.

Public sector cuts will destabilise some voluntary organisations that exist on 'patchwork' funding, using public money to lever in external funds in order to keep themselves going. Research published by the Third Sector Research Centre on 19th October 2010 found that 47,000 charities (36% of the voluntary sector) receive income from statutory sources, and of these, 13% say that it is their most important source of funding. Charitable funding is short term, in high demand and does not meet the requirement for sustainable, continuous funding that is needed to provide ongoing support to vulnerable people.

Small-scale community action can operate for a time for free, but sustained input from volunteers in working with vulnerable children and adults requires them to be carefully recruited and selected, trained and supported, and none of this is cost-free. Some services are so sensitive and personal, so demanding and of such importance to the welfare of an individual that they cannot be provided by volunteers but most have paid staff to provide them.

In short, the **Big Society** relies upon the right support being in place to help local people to take sustained action to support and improve their communities; on public sector tenders encouraging local voluntary organisations to come together to provide public services, ensuring that a diverse local voluntary sector thrives on communication and partnership between public sector and voluntary sector bodies. We really will have to all be 'in this together'.

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Linda Rogers has worked and volunteered in the voluntary sector for 28 years, carrying out roles from county-based field work to regional management and membership of national management committees. Voluntary Norfolk is the largest Council for Voluntary Service in England, employing 100 staff and offering a range of contracted and back-office services in addition to its core business of supporting volunteers and voluntary organisations.

About TCI

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