

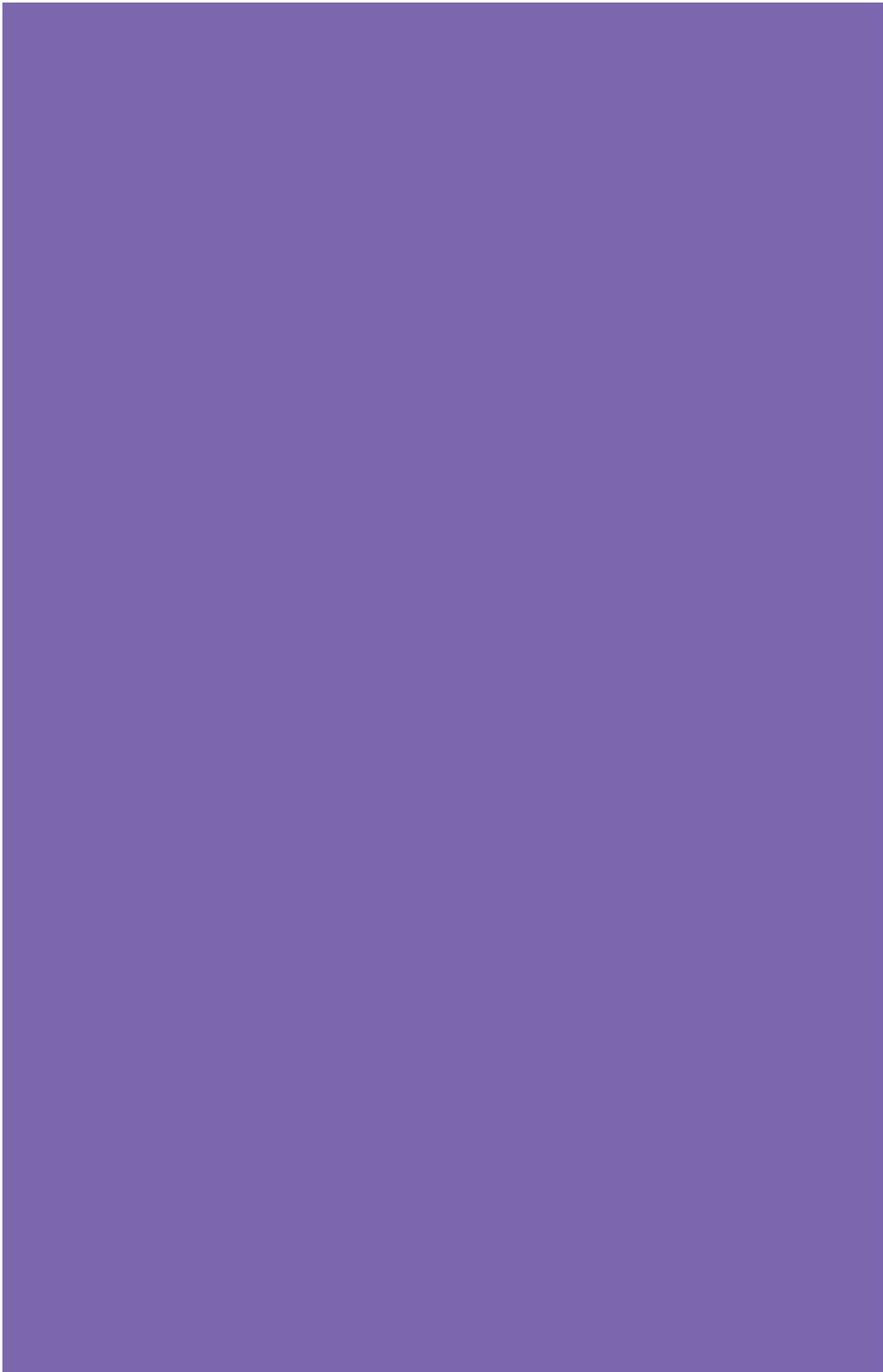


CabinetOffice

Office for Civil Society

Supporting a Stronger Civil Society

An Office for Civil Society consultation
on improving support for frontline civil
society organisations



Foreword

The Prime Minister has put building a stronger sense of society – the Big Society – at the heart of our agenda for Government. Through a radical transfer of power and information we want to inspire more people to come together and drive local solutions to our social problems.

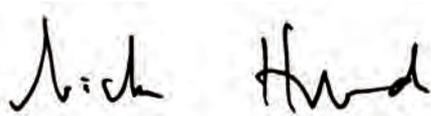
We want to open up our public services to new providers, including within the voluntary and community sector, to harness innovation and responsiveness to public need. The Big Society will not come about simply through Government withdrawal, but requires active and thoughtful remoulding of the state. We recognise that the Government has an active role to play in strengthening the capacity of neighbourhood groups, social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups to meet the challenges and take full advantage of the new opportunities ahead.

So among other initiatives, and subject to the Spending Review, we are planning to train a new generation of community organisers to help build local networks and leadership to support those who want to take more control. We intend them to have access to a new community grant programme, which will encourage neighbourhood groups to form and develop their own plans.

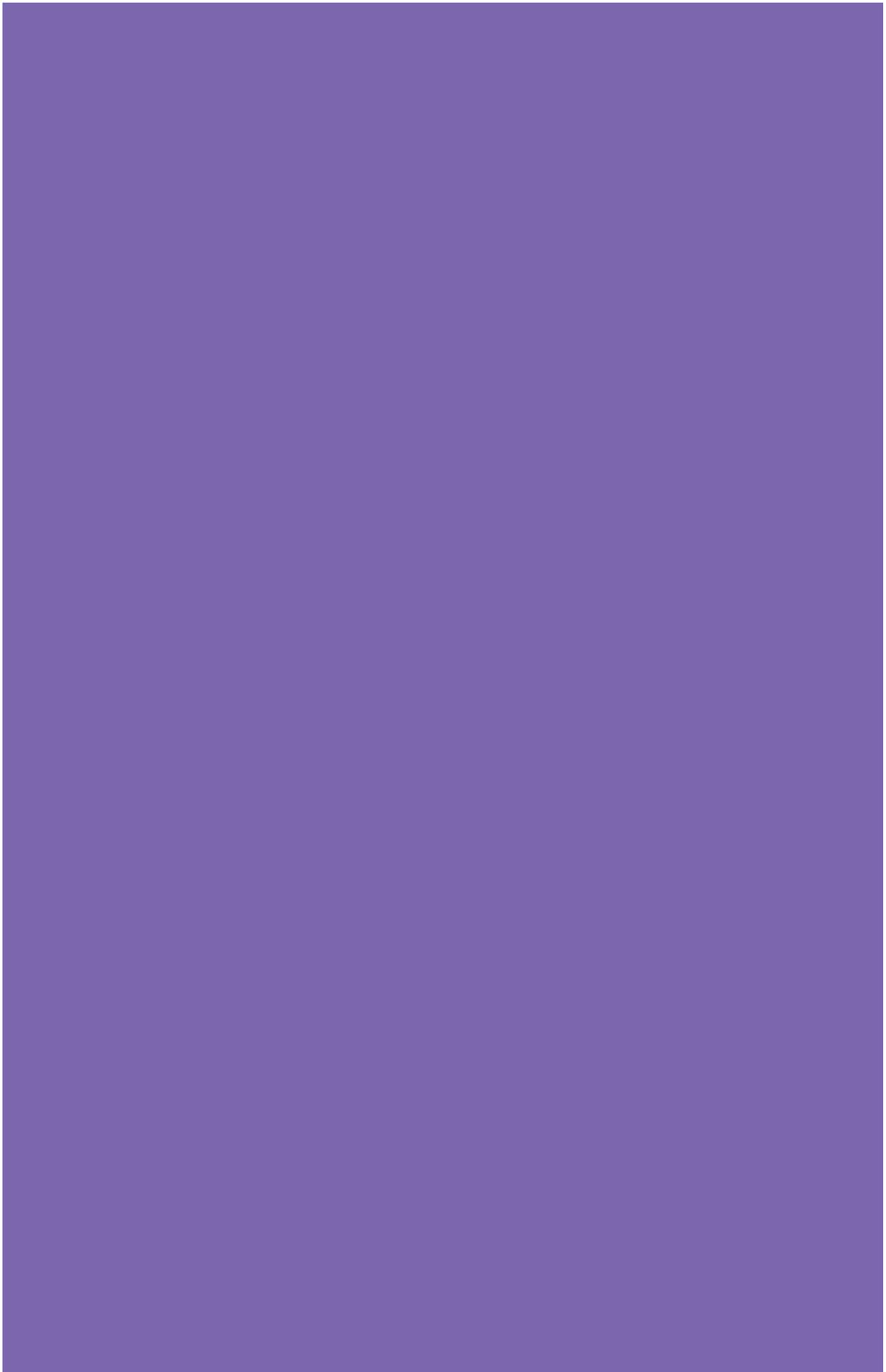
We will also set up a Big Society Bank to make it easier to access capital and advice. This will be funded by dormant bank accounts.

As a result of the Government's plans for reform, there will be more opportunities for charities, voluntary groups and social enterprises than ever before. There will be greater access to government funding through public sector contracts, but we recognise that you will need support to help you prepare for these new opportunities.

The purpose of the paper is to consult on how central Government can best play a role to support building infrastructure in the sector. We want to end top down initiatives that filter spending through multiple layers, and we want to make the support you receive more relevant, simpler to obtain and in keeping with our agenda for the Big Society. Tell us how you think we can best do this.



Nick Hurd MP
Minister for Civil Society



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1. Context

“You can call it liberalism.
You can call it empowerment.
You can call it freedom.
You can call it responsibility.
I call it the Big Society...
the biggest, most dramatic
redistribution of power from
elites in Whitehall to the man
and woman on the street.”

David Cameron 18 May 2010

The Big Society agenda will create new opportunities and challenges for civil society across the UK. Our long term vision for change is based around three areas:

Promoting social action: We believe that more people will look for opportunities to make a difference with their time and money.

Empowering local communities: Those who think they can do better will have the right to bid for public contracts and take over the use of community assets. There will be much more information available to help challenge the status quo.

Opening up public sector contracts: We are committed to ensuring charities, social enterprises and cooperatives will have a much greater role in the running of public services.

Over the long term, this profound culture change should strengthen the role and influence of the diverse ecosystem that is British civil society. However, this opportunity emerges at a very challenging time. In the short term the funding environment will continue to be very tough. The priorities for the Office for Civil Society are to make it easier to set up and run a charity, social enterprise or voluntary group; get more resources into the sector; and make it easier for the sector to work with the state. We will work to strengthen the capacity of the sector through a renewed Compact, a taskforce to cut red tape and a new programme to improve the effectiveness of infrastructure organisations¹ and support services.

Civil society organisations (charities, social enterprises and voluntary groups) will need to embrace new skills, partnerships and organisational models if they are to seize the opportunities that lie ahead. It will be vital for civil society organisations to improve their business skills, become more entrepreneurial and strengthen their governance. It is in this context that we want to look again at the effectiveness of the support frontline groups receive and the role of Government in helping civil society make the transition to greater strength and independence.

1. Infrastructure organisations give support and advice to frontline groups, and in some cases advocate on their behalf (distinct from organisations that advise individual citizens).

2. Principles of reform

“The rule of this Government should be this: If it unleashes community engagement – we should do it. If it crushes it – we shouldn’t.”

David Cameron 18 May 2010

We know that only 18% of organisations receive support from infrastructure organisations but those groups that do are more likely to be successful in grant applications or bidding for contracts (see the analysis in Annex A). Currently the sector receives support from a wide range of organisations and funding streams and we believe the landscape is too confusing and centrally driven. Therefore the purpose of this document is to find out what types of support would be most helpful to you and how the Government can help improve local relationships, support mentoring schemes, and facilitate the sharing of skills and experience within the sector.

We know that Government’s resources must be targeted where there is most need, address disadvantage and achieve the maximum impact. Our funding will be guided by the following principles:

- Central investment must be a catalyst for driving greater efficiency and reducing long term dependence on the state.
- Reform of the support system must be driven by frontline needs.
- Infrastructure organisations have a valuable role to play, not least in strengthening local networks.
- To address inequality, ensure all voices are heard and promote cohesion, there is a need to ensure support is accessible by diverse organisations.

Through this consultation, the Office for Civil Society is looking for your thoughts on its role in ensuring that civil society has the advice, support and influence it needs to help build the Big Society in England. The consultation presents some potential priorities for this.

Responses will also help to develop an Equalities Impact Assessment, to be published with the Government summary and response.

3. Potential priorities for action

“... the best ideas come from the ground up, not the top down. We know that when you give people and communities more power over their lives, more power to come together and work together to make life better – great things happen.”

David Cameron, 18 May 2010

Government wants to invest in a new programme of strategic interventions which will help organisations modernise and become more efficient and more entrepreneurial in order to take advantage of the opportunities ahead. We want to help improve the effectiveness of support and advice that can enable this change to happen, including the advice provided by infrastructure organisations. This could involve:

- Easier access to advice through better use of online support,
- Encouraging better connections between small organisations and skilled volunteers or mentors from business or larger charities,
- Enabling infrastructure organisations to rationalise and become more effective,
- Direct support to frontline organisations to help them get ready for the new opportunities ahead.

Easier access to advice

There are already rich sources of online support for groups. Current examples of websites providing information to voluntary and community groups are:

www.fundingcentral.org.uk

www.direct.gov.uk

www.improvingsupport.org.uk.

In addition, some civil society groups may not be aware of the relevance of resources on www.businesslink.gov.uk (for example on financial management and employment law).

The Office for Civil Society could have a role in streamlining existing online directories to ensure that toolkits and resources can be shared efficiently, providing higher quality and timely information on locally available support.

Question 1: How can online services for frontline groups be improved?

Accessing wider sources of support

In the past, the Government's approach to building the capacity and skills of civil society focused on a limited range of providers, primarily charities and social enterprises such as local Councils for Voluntary Service. The current Government wants to encourage better connections both among civil society organisations and with the public and private sectors. The potential to transfer relevant skills has barely been tapped. Whether a large charity mentoring a small organisation, or businesses providing advice

to community groups, we see huge potential for skills transfer in this area. This type of mentoring scheme is consistent with Big Society principles, and would be a break from the top down approach of the past.

Employer-supported volunteering is also under used and is of benefit both to the volunteer and the organisation they help. It utilises important business expertise in areas where support can be expensive or in short supply. Pro bono support can be brokered locally or by national organisations which match skilled volunteers to the needs of civil society organisations.

Research shows that frontline groups do not always know what pro bono support is available in their area and shows that brokerage is unevenly spread or uncoordinated. Better brokerage and matching of volunteers could help tap this under used resource.

Question 2: What can Government do to forge more effective links and transfer skills between small civil society organisations and businesses or larger charities?

Question 3: How could brokerage of pro bono support be improved?

Direct support to build the skills of frontline organisations

The Government wants to help organisations modernise and restructure to take advantage of the opportunities that are opening up. Bursaries could help frontline groups access specialist services to become less reliant on the state, bid for public service contracts, modernise or be more entrepreneurial. Bursaries put the organisation in control, enabling it to access the advice that is right for its circumstances and choose from a range of providers. They can play a role within the wider system of support. Evaluation found very high satisfaction with bursaries; 83% of grant recipients from the recent Modernisation Fund indicated that these made their progress ‘more likely to be successful’².

Question 4: What support might your organisation need to become more resilient?

Question 5: What do you think should be the priorities for a bursary fund?

Question 6: How could any bursary fund be delivered simply and fairly?

2. Evaluation of Real Help for Communities: Modernisation Fund Interim Report, 2010, Cordis Bright.

Consolidation of infrastructure

In a time of fiscal tightening it is more important than ever for local and national infrastructure organisations to maximise economies of scale. Mergers and substantial collaboration (such as sharing back office functions and joint procurement), can help ensure that frontline groups continue to benefit from coordinated, high quality, sustainable support services. There is a strong case for rationalisation of support services at a local and national level. Case studies show strong results from mergers, and commissioners have very positive views (a survey found that 92% felt that greater collaboration of infrastructure would bring benefits)³.

Consolidation can require radical changes with up-front costs, which infrastructure organisations have difficulty funding. There could be an opportunity for time-limited consolidation grants to enable infrastructure to implement merger or substantial collaboration. The funding will be limited, so clear criteria would be needed, potentially around ensuring that rationalisation is part of locally agreed plans for the reconfiguration of services with local authority support over time; or targeting improved quality of services to the frontline; or support for diverse groups.

Question 7: How could consolidation grants help ensure the sustainability and efficiency of infrastructure services?

Encouraging better public sector partnerships

As new markets for the sector open up, the role of infrastructure organisations can increase. They can act as a conduit between the local public sector and civil society in decision-making, designing and delivering services and supporting the voice of people who use services. Evidence shows that those who use support services are much more likely to report good relationships with the public sector. We know that in some areas this social capital is weak, so an option could be to target these areas to improve access to support and promote better relationships with the public sector⁴.

Question 8: Are there ways that expert intervention can support areas which are lacking social capital to improve local relationships and develop a stronger civil society?

3. Learning from Mergers, Shared Intelligence, 2010

4. Getting Things Done Together: Key Findings from the Partnership Improvement Programme 2009. I&DeA and IVAR

Central Government partnerships with national infrastructure⁵

National infrastructure organisations (such as umbrella bodies) have a role to play in shaping the development of Government policy.

Their economies of scale can enable them to provide specialist advice. The Office for Civil Society strategic partners grant programme began in 2006 and is due to end in March 2011. It contributes to the core costs of 39 organisations operating at a national level.

The Office for Civil Society intends to commission a new strategic partner programme (dependent on the result of the upcoming Spending Review). The key funding criteria for any new programme may include an organisation's ability to:

- Represent a part of the sector or the sector as a whole, in helping to shape government policy,
- Help to deliver the vision for the Big Society, including the three priorities for civil society (set out in chapter 1).

Question 9: How can central Government best work with national infrastructure to support and deliver the Big Society?

Final note

All the potential priorities set out in this consultation paper are for discussion and should not be considered to indicate firm commitments to action. However, any action taken in these areas could be linked, to ensure that the frontline experience of accessing support is coherent. This could mean that an organisation would first search online for useful toolkits and resources. If they needed further help, the website would help signpost them to infrastructure services. If these did not meet their needs, then improved brokerage would enable them to access skills from pro bono volunteers. Where their needs were still unmet, and in line with the criteria, then they could apply for a bursary. This would encourage efficiencies by ensuring that low cost options are explored first and help make the process of accessing support more streamlined for local groups.

Question 10: Do you have further suggestions or comments on how the Office for Civil Society can help frontline groups become more efficient and effective?

5. Note that responses to Question 9 in this section are needed by an earlier date, set out in Annex B