

Big Society – a response from Urban Forum

The Big Society programme has polarised debate, with opinion divided between those who regard it as an ambitious plan to radically transform social policy and others who see it as a cynical attempt to plug the gaps in public service as public spending is withdrawn. This paper aims to provide a measured and constructive response to the programme that recognises its current strengths and weaknesses and brings a community sector perspective to the debate.

Blue skies thinking is hard to do, with so many dark clouds overhead

Feedback from Urban Forum's members in the community sector suggests there is a real desire to believe that Big Society offers genuine opportunities to redefine the relationship between communities and the state. However, this cautious optimism is set within a mood of great fear and nervousness about the impact of the public spending cuts on the voluntary and community sector.

The Big Society narrative

Big Society potentially offers communities and neighbourhood groups new opportunities and greater prominence in government policy. We welcome the rebalancing of policy towards smaller, community based, neighbourhood groups that make up Urban Forum's membership. These neighbourhood groups have tended to be overlooked in recent policy and in the allocation of resources, as the previous government focused increasingly on 'third sector service delivery' and far less on community association.

There are two distinct strands to the Big Society programme; on the one hand radical reform of public service delivery and on the other, encouraging widespread social action. It's currently unclear how (or whether) these two elements connect and the relationship between them, which is something that needs to be addressed. It is important to clarify how the public service reform aspects of Big Society fits with community action elements of the programme, if we are to map the paths that successful neighbourhood groups might take. Presumably, for those that want to, it is sensible to support local groups to move to service delivery or scale up their activities? Therefore the paths that they might take need to be properly understood and mapped out. However, this does not mean that all neighbourhood groups should seek to become service deliverers or that there should be any sense of a hierarchy at play. A healthy civil society requires a diversity of groups and we must recognise the strengths and weaknesses of particular approaches.

The two strands are also operating under very different timeframes, which is significant. The pressure for immediate public spending cuts makes public service reform extremely urgent. However, building a 'new generation of community organisers' and having 'every adult involved in a neighbourhood group' will take many years to achieve, if it is ever to be realised. The timescale for these two strands matters a great deal when we examine the relationship between public service reform and social action.

High levels of community action can build strong communities and networks and help local citizens to develop skills and resources. This can help create conditions under which local

people are better equipped to hold the state to account and to take over the running of failing public services. In this way, strong civil society can support public service transformation. But whilst workers co-operatives and community-run public services are a welcome development and may result in improved public services, they do not necessarily lead to increased levels of community action.

If we accept the view that community organising supports service delivery transformation, but public service reform doesn't inevitably support social action, then this raises serious questions about the current chronology.

Community organisers - Rules for Radicals?

The origins of community organising date back to the work of Saul Alinsky in poor neighbourhoods in the US and his 1971 book *Rules for Radicals*¹. Alinsky's framework for community organising is now successfully employed throughout the world, including here in the UK by organisations such as London Citizens². It is worth noting that this is not the only model of community organising and a similarly effective approach is based on Paulo Friere's work, such as that used by organisations like the RE:generate Trust³. Alinsky's approach appears to be the blueprint for the Big Society programme's commitment to support a 'new generation of community organisers'⁴. The approach has considerable merit and community organising (and indeed its close relative, community development), is a powerful tool that can be used to achieve positive social change.

Alinsky presented *Rules for Radicals* as a handbook '...for the Have-Nots on how to take it [power] away'⁵. At the centre of community organising is a recognition of the importance of power dynamics and inequalities. Its aim is nothing less than a redistribution of power. Since Alinsky is mentioned in the Conservative's pre-election Big Society policy paper⁶, we must assume that recognising and tackling power inequalities is a key component of the government's plans. If that is the case, we applaud its ambition, but this must then translate into practice in every aspect of the programme, and across Whitehall. This 'joining up' across government departments and policies was an unrealised ambition of the previous government and we hope that the new government is more successful. We should not be under any illusion that the redistribution of power will be seen – for example by some local authorities and elected members – as a threat, and will not go unchallenged.

A second key aspect of Alinsky's approach is that collective action is the foundation for community organising – building groups and networks to achieve positive change. This is crucial if we are to mobilise the untapped resources that exist in deprived communities and to avoid reinforcing inter-community competition and tensions. Having thousands of autonomous neighbourhood groups should not be the extent of our ambition. If these groups operate in isolation from each other then parochialism will result, with each group defending its own neighbourhood's interests without regard to the surrounding vicinity. This does not help improve the design and delivery of public services across a local authority area. To achieve the sort of efficiency savings the public sector is now tasked with, we need to bring together these groups to work together to achieve common goals – locally, regionally and nationally.

¹ *Rules for Radicals*, Saul Alinsky (1971)

² See: <http://www.citizensuk.org/history/>

³ See: <http://www.regeneratetrust.org/>

⁴ *Building Big Society*, Cabinet Office (May 2010)

⁵ From introduction to *Rules for Radicals*, Saul Alinsky (1971)

⁶ See: <http://bit.ly/bw1wgz>

Building networks and bringing groups together takes effort and resources. The experience of Community Empowerment Network (CENs) offers considerable insight into the challenges in linking up neighbourhood action to wider strategic decision-making at a local authority level⁷. Strong neighbourhood working is not a substitute for strategy at a local authority (or city-region, or sub-regional, or even a regional) level, but it must be complementary to it. Some groups, who have traditionally been excluded, face particular barriers and therefore require particular support to overcome them. Mutualism and cooperation cannot be confined to service delivery alone. Community action must also be founded on principles of collaboration and mutual support.

Whilst the indications are that the current government does not favour the term (or provision of?) 'infrastructure', access to appropriate support for community action is crucial. Even the most effective activists need support and will benefit from collaboration. The establishment of a Big Society Network may grow to provide some of the necessary support, which is valuable. But the Network neither aspires to, nor could it ever, meet the total needs of every community group and activist. Network building has huge value in building mutual support, sharing learning and good practice, building economies of scale (whilst retaining independence) and in allocating and mobilising resources in an efficient way. The provision of support for neighbourhood groups and network building is critical to the Big Society's aims and must be resourced.

Tackling inequality is central to Big Society

If Big Society is genuinely about placing power in the hands of those who currently lack it, then an appreciation of the current power inequalities is essential. Without understanding who lacks power, how can efforts be focused on supporting those who need it?

The acknowledgement among some policy-makers that the conclusion of the 'The Spirit Level'⁸ – that inequality is bad for society as a whole and harms rich and poor alike – is particularly welcome. This understanding should provide added impetus to placing tackling inequality at the heart of the Big Society. However, at present there is a risk that creating opportunities without providing support to marginalised groups will exacerbate inequality and harm society. The state has a role to play in protecting minority interests as, without this, smaller groups will be unable to have their voices heard. A good example of this is the use of petitions, with a threshold which triggers a duty for the local authority to respond. How can a group that accounts for just a small proportion of the overall population, for example LGBT (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgendered) people, use this opportunity?

A number of reports have highlighted the disproportionately adverse impact that spending cuts will have on particular groups and areas, including women⁹, young people¹⁰, BME communities¹¹ and large parts of northern England¹² as well as poor people generally¹³. Not only does this undermine attempts at 'fairness', it also fails to mobilise the considerable resources and creativity that exist within these groups. With near-universal acknowledgement that we now need 'new ways of working' we cannot afford to overlook the contribution that excluded groups have to make.

⁷ Community Participation in Neighbourhood Renewal, National Audit Office (2004). See: <http://www.nao.org.uk/idoc.ashx?docId=c4688983-cd90-4e52-b785-ce9a051bd135&version=-1>

⁸ The Spirit Level, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2009)

⁹ House of Commons Library research for Yvette Cooper (July 2010), <http://www.yvettecooper.com/women-bear-brunt-of-budget-cuts>

¹⁰ For example: <http://www.leftfootforward.org/2010/06/young-people-are-poorly-served-by-the-coalitions-cuts/>

¹¹ Runnymede Trust: <http://www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/68/359/Race-equality-and-the-emergency-budget.html>

¹² IPPR North: <http://www.ippr.org.uk/ipprnorth/pressreleases/?id=4040>

¹³ Institute of Fiscal Studies, <http://www.ifs.org.uk/projects/330>

What does success look like? Understanding what constitutes 'BIG'

The previous government's fixation with managerialism and a target culture undermined localism and the potential for more locally responsive services (despite belated attempts to start addressing this). Efforts to reduce bureaucracy and to move to more local flexibility in performance management are sensible (who would support more bureaucracy?), but it is essential to replace things like the Comprehensive Area Assessment with new systems for measuring improvement. In its desire to jettison burdensome regulation, there is a risk that the government will reject any meaningful measurement of performance. And yet there is a comfortable middle-ground between 'command and control' and a wholly laissez faire approach to performance management. What is needed is a new system based on outcomes that matter to local people, but which still provide comparable data.

This applies as much to Big Society as to broader government policy. How else will we know whether government has achieved its aims and understand what's worked and what has not? To understand and measure progress we need to first understand and define what constitutes Big Society. It may be that government does not want to undertake this – for reasons of not wanting to be prescriptive or perhaps because of disinterest in any form of performance management – in which case we within the voluntary and community sector must define it for ourselves. Defining what is, and what is not, Big Society raises a number of important questions: what constitutes a neighbourhood group? Can people opt in, or out, of being part of the Big Society? Do we know what the current picture looks like? Put simply, if we are to measure progress, don't we need a baseline from which to start?

Big Society is currently all-encompassing – anything good that civil society does is in! – and this has potential to be very inclusive. However, there is a danger that it becomes so diffuse as to be meaningless as a concept. Does a private sector company's Corporate Social Responsibility and employee volunteering programme mean they are part of the Big Society? What does McDonalds (who will be training the volunteers for the London Olympics) have in common with Greenbank Tenants and Residents Association?

Understanding what works and building on success requires a system for measuring progress. Voluntary and community groups must work with government to establish a clear understanding of what is and isn't part of Big Society and how we measure success.

Reforming public service delivery

Notwithstanding questions over the public's appetite to actually take over public services¹⁴, the principle of enabling local communities to hold public services to account or to take over their running is positive, provided steps are taken to ensure this does not exacerbate inequalities. Opportunities may be more readily taken up by more affluent communities that have the necessary skills, social capital, ambition and time to do so. If this happens, it will divert precious public funds away from more deprived neighbourhoods, thereby undermining the government's aim for 'fairness and opportunity for all'¹⁵. The experience of 'free schools' in Sweden suggests that simply creating opportunities for services to be taken over, does not guarantee improved delivery. The Swedish education minister said recently that the free schools had seen standards drop and inequality rise¹⁶. We must be aware of the unforeseen or unintended consequences of creating opportunities that benefit the already powerful at the expense of those who currently lack power.

¹⁴ See: <http://bit.ly/avln9X>

¹⁵ Building Big Society, Cabinet Office (2010) www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/407789/building-big-society.pdf

¹⁶ <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/2010/05/30/flagship-tory-free-schools-doomed-115875-22296075/>

The question of whether or not Big Society is an attempt to replace state-funded public services with voluntary effort overlooks the fact that this is and has always been the case. The foundations of charity and voluntary action in the UK have traditionally been based on citizens collaborating to respond to unmet needs. Where would our social care system be without the estimated six million carers¹⁷ who look after their loved ones in a voluntary capacity? Apparently, £87 billion worse off¹⁸, which is a vast sum even in the context of the current spending cuts. It's worth reminding ourselves that voluntary efforts to fill gaps in public service provision are nothing new. Another longstanding British tradition is also in evidence in the Big Society agenda – blending private sector capital with social purpose – which can be traced back to social reformers of the 19th Century such as Joseph Rowntree and Henrietta Barnett. It's worth remembering our (internationally admired) heritage and recognising that civil society has historically emerged to provide for the needs of the most vulnerable in society.

Local government and Big Society

The relationship between Big Society and local government is extremely unclear and in particular the role of local councillors. There is little reference made to local authorities in the Big Society policy documents, and what little there is refers primarily to council services being taken over by social enterprises and charities. It is unclear whether the government wish simply to bypass local authorities in focusing on neighbourhood groups, but if this is the case it is extremely misguided, as the recent past shows us. The Labour government's empowerment agenda alienated many local authorities, who resented being told by the centre what to do and how to do it (implying that central government knew best). The Big Society programme needs to engage local government and define a clear enabling role in supporting social action. Strong civil society has the potential to breathe new life into our democracy and renew our civic institutions.

Local government, and other public sector bodies, are acutely aware of unpopular decisions they are having to make in cutting public spending and, in this context, engaging local councillors is crucial in order to avoid further retrenchment. There is a significant amount of good work on community engagement being done by local authorities (though this is by no means consistently true) and there is a risk that this is overlooked in a vision of Big Society that excludes a clear public sector role. And the resources that local government and its partners have at their disposal, even within a climate of austerity, is still vast relative to the resources of the community sector. Public funds must be used to leverage latent community resource and private sector investment to build the Big Society. There is also a major benefit to collaborative working between local government and community groups¹⁹ in deliberating together the ways to take decisions on spending cuts. The recent enthusiasm in the UK for (and success of) participatory budgeting (PB) provides a startlingly obvious example of how local authorities can enable community decision-making on public spending. But we must be wary of how common the misuse of participatory processes like PB is and ensure it is conducted in empowering ways.

Finance, economics and the Big Society

The government has made clear that reducing the public deficit is an urgent priority and severe spending cuts are now underway, with a great deal of funding being cut from programmes that would contribute to the goals of the Big Society. Given the government's target to eliminate the structural deficit over the course of this Parliament, it is almost inevitable that some funding that would help neighbourhood groups will be lost. But there

¹⁷ Facts About Caring 2009, Carers UK <http://www.carersuk.org/Newsandcampaigns/Media/Factsaboutcaring>

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ See case studies in; Local Action, Urban Forum and bassac (2010)

is a far more substantial risk that the approach to the spending cuts will severely undermine the credibility of the government's commitment to Big Society goals. These two priorities; reducing the deficit and building the Big Society need to be reconciled if either are to be credible in the eyes of communities and community groups.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the area of welfare reform, with the stated desire to significantly reduce the benefits bill. Will this be done in ways that contribute to Big Society or impede it? Introducing a Community Allowance²⁰ would enable people on benefits to do work that builds the Big Society whilst developing skills, creating new jobs and helping individuals climb out of the benefits trap. Simply making it harder to claim benefits just to reduce costs will harm many of the poorest and most vulnerable in society. We need a far more progressive approach to welfare reform in particular, and spending cuts in general, to create conditions for the Big Society to flourish.

Alongside the Big Society plans to transform society and citizens' relationship with the state, the coalition government has also set out plans for political reform. However, if these ambitions of social and political reform are to be realised, we must also have economic reform as part of the process. Economic policy and regulation require urgent renewal to respond to the changes that political and social reform will bring. The Liberal Democrat's election manifesto offered a range of proposals which would support a more localised model of economic development and build resilient local economies²¹. These included local income tax and regional stock exchanges and local retail development plans to improve the balance between large and small retailers and protect the high street²².

The private sector is expected to play a major role in our economic recovery and we will also need to forge new relationships between the voluntary sector and companies to achieve the Big Society vision. This will need to extend far beyond current corporate social responsibility into genuinely meaningful partnerships based on new (and old) ways of working.

The Big Society Bank is one small step along the right lines, but thus far the coalition government has not demonstrated its appetite for economic reform to support social reform. Despite committing to introduce a new levy on banks, there has been too little fundamental reform our financial services. There is considerable potential to introduce a regulatory system that serves social interest, supports enterprise and is commercially viable for banks. The introduction of a Community Reinvestment Act²³ could provide appropriate incentives for banks to invest in poor communities and provide a huge boost towards the Big Society vision. There is a great deal of innovation in social and community finance taking place, including ideas such as community shares²⁴, social impact bonds²⁵, blended value investment²⁶ and even a 'Big Society ISA'²⁷. All of these initiatives add to the range of tools we have at our disposal to support social activity. However, most of these are located at the margins of our economy, in the (growing) area of social investment and community finance, but could be encouraged through more progressive economic policy and financial service reform.

²⁰ <http://www.communityallowance.org/about-us/what-is-the-community-allowance/>

²¹ For our assessment of these see: http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/files/the_road_to_may_6th_2010_04.pdf

²² Four steps to a fairer Britain, Liberal Democrat Party General Election manifesto (2010)

²³ See: <http://www.urbanforum.org.uk/briefings/10-things-you-need-to-know-about-community-reinvestment>

²⁴ See <http://www.communityshares.org.uk/>

²⁵ See http://www.socialfinance.org.uk/services/index.php?page_ID=15

²⁶ See for example: <http://www.citylifeld.org/page/116/how-our-bonds-work.htm>

²⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/jun/18/lord-wei-big-society-isa>

The government's support for mutuals and co-operatives is more substantial, at least in its potential to redefine how we 'do business', but we need to go much further and design local economic policy that supports the localism agenda. If we are serious about tackling inequality and redistributing power then we need to address the economic dimension of poverty and inequality. We need to find ways to 'recapitalise the poor'²⁸, as Phillip Blond puts it, and help deprived communities and households build an asset base.

We need to learn from what's gone before

Although the nature of our political system creates a desire for the new government to distance itself from the previous government, this must not prevent us from learning from recent experience. The Labour government's neighbourhood renewal strategy, community empowerment and third sector policy all offer valuable lessons of what has worked and what has not. So too does the Take Part programme and earlier active citizenship programmes, that have invested heavily in building networks of civic activists.

There is a risk that in a desire to be 'new' the government overlooks the vast number of successful neighbourhood groups and community organisers that already operate throughout the UK. The Big Society programme must not alienate these activists by ignoring them, but rather work with them to tap into their experience and expertise to encourage and lead and inspire others into action.

Despite aspects of the Big Society programme which are clearly a departure from previous policy, there is also much that it shares in common with the policies of the previous government. Practical direct experience exists within communities and community groups today and can be used to inform the design of future policy and practice. The political desire to reject everything that Labour did whilst in power must be tempered with an appreciation that some of it was successful, some not, and that the learning that resides in the minds of activists and networks is all valuable.

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²⁸ Red Tory, Phillip Blond (2010)