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# The 'big society': next **practice** and public service **utures**

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# Public service futures . . .



by Clive Grace and Rob Whiteman

The notion of the 'big society' is a central idea in the thinking of the coalition government and central also to understanding its approach to the future of public services. The 'big society' looks to greater citizen responsibility to sit alongside citizens' rights. It envisages more involvement and voluntary effort, and eventually a bigger stock of social capital and a stronger cohesion and social glue.

Hand in hand with the 'big society' goes the smaller state – smaller in scale as a matter of principle and aspiration rather than mere austerity, but also smaller in its range of functions, and smaller in terms of the number of governmental and quasi-governmental public bodies. These are seen as fogging the landscape with bureaucracy and entrenched special interests, and masking accountability.

Carried through into ways of behaving and ways of delivering services, these ideas can have profound effect on citizens and communities, and on public services and public servants alike. Our job here is explore some key dimensions of the 'big society' idea, positively and with an open mind, and

also to test and challenge it as a means to optimise its value as a stimulus to better lives and better places, and better ways to tackle the many 'wicked' issues which still confront both government and the people.

## **New paradigm ... old wine?**

This collection of articles enthusiastically embraces 'big society' as representing a defining period reflecting a new set of values and presaging total change. There is a caveat here, because like any 'new' idea in social discourse, 'big society' clearly draws upon themes and threads already present in the ideas it seeks to replace. The localist thrust of 'big society', for example, strongly echoes the principal messages of subsidiarity, which proposes the distribution of responsibility according to the principle of entrusting it to the lowest possible level consistent with societal wellbeing, including the familial level. As with 'big society' there is no presumption that local government is the fundamental level.

Similarly, its emphasis on voluntary activity looks more like continuity than fracture with previous nostrums about

the third sector, for all they may be expressed in a different guise. And the call to arms for the army of armchair auditors is highly consistent with the Blair and Brown governments' aspirations for the public to hold public services to account through a market place of performance information and stronger community voice.

It should not therefore come as any surprise that many of the contributions in this pamphlet describe how the work they are already doing serves to deliver part of the 'big society', or reflects its key tenets. That work will have its place in the new context, just as new ways of working founded fully in 'big society' rhetoric and thinking will develop and be tested in the period ahead.

### **Solera ... or new barrel?**

But even if we can detect familiar flavours in the 'big society' mix, it is indeed best to understand it as a fracture with what has gone before, for it derives from a broad and very different appreciation of the role of both state and society in modern Britain.

It is also coupled by necessity with the austerity context which dominates public service thinking and planning. This serves to give it more than merely a new twist. Rather, it generates new challenges which may have arisen on a grand scale, but which may well fall to be tackled less by overarching central policy than ground-up solutions and local innovations. It is new wine in a new barrel, and not merely a top-up of what we already had in our cellars.

### **Appreciation**

We thank Robin Tuddenham most

warmly for prompting and editing this pamphlet, and organising its many high quality contributions. Between them our contributors have produced not only an important account of how the dimensions of 'big society' are already being worked through in many key areas, but also a sense of how its potential might be more fully realised.

This pamphlet also marks a new and positive phase in the close and supportive relationship which has long existed between SFI and LGID, and we look forward to working together in bringing forward perspectives and ideas to enrich both the policy and the practice of public and community service.

*Clive Grace, chair, SFI, and Rob White-man, managing director, LG Improvement and Development*



# 'Big society': next practice

by Robin Tuddenham

"Now that my ladder has gone, I must lie down where all my ladders start"

*W B Yeats*

We are in the middle of a defining period for public services, which will profoundly change how they are provided, to what level and by whom. The new coalition government has acted with pace, making significant decisions on funding, and the infrastructure of the state. Many of our previous 'ladders' are being removed. This is not just in response to the economic context of the deficit, but is driven by a new set of values.

While there has been much debate about the fuzziness of the 'big society' agenda, it is clear that it heralds a shift from the central to the local, transforming the relationship between the citizen and state. As the recently published localism bill demonstrates, the neighbourhood is the focal point, the place where "the ladder starts".

This pamphlet seeks to engage with the 'big society' idea and the opportunities and challenges it brings to public services and particularly local authorities. The essays cover a diverse range of themes, unified by a sense that

to achieve its potential, 'big society' will need to realise what is described by management guru Coimbatore Krishnarao Prahalad as 'next practice' rather than best practice.

This means it will:

- Totally change current models of service delivery
- Be genuinely user- and practitioner-generated
- Occur in advance of hard evidence of effectiveness
- Incorporate inherent risks to achieve potential rewards
- Be mindful of the previous lit path while trying things that are entirely new
- Be led by totally committed and informed practitioners and commissioners

The essays in this publication provide a route map for the pivotal role of local government in delivering 'big society'. They consider how local authorities can become co-authors of a new script. In the spirit of what Francis Maude, minister for the Cabinet Office, has described as the "hyper-local, granular, bottom-up" approach, they combine practical examples of making it happen, building on the best of what has come before, augmented with reflections on

opportunities for next practice within emerging initiatives and policy shifts in welfare, rehabilitation and health.

Baroness Eaton's essay opens on the role of elected councillors within this process. But Lord Adebowale offers an early challenge, articulating two potential futures, with only one realising the potential. This can only happen if local government moves neighbourhood working from the margins into the mainstream.

Contributions from local authorities who are already delivering the big society through public sector reform, social action and community empowerment offer an immediate response. Whether it is Sutton's participatory budgeting and community-led gritting or Blackburn and Darwen's organisational shift in public health rooted in 150 years of civic life, there are a myriad of examples and tips for others. Michael Coughlin's essay illustrates how 'big society' is a mechanism to enable new forms of public service mindful of the new fiscal realities we all face. Gavin Jones advocates a similar focus, reducing the cost of supporting the most vulnerable families in Swindon through fundamental service redesign.

Further essays take the 'big society' agenda into wider areas of policy development such as school improvement, child protection, offender rehabilitation and community resilience to extremism. These are followed by perspectives from the voluntary sector. Toby Blume outlines some surprising implications of national policy initiatives such as community organisers. Soo Nevison describes how all of this feels at a local level, and Fiyaz Mughal argues for a genuine shift in how public services work with faith communities.

There is much debate at present about how all of us involved in public services support behaviour change, which is essential if the big society is to succeed. If we see local government as a social network, we might want to think about how the innovative work of those writing in this publication supports this process and just do some of the same.

This impetus towards action is explicit in councillor Richard Kemp's essay which concludes the pamphlet. He makes a plea to worry less about what the big society is, and seize the opportunities offered by localism and community budgets. His closing words to just get on with it: remind me of what Goethe once said "You can not finish tomorrow what you have not started today."

I would like to thank all the contributors who have made that next step of starting today somewhat easier.

*Robin Tuddenham is director of safer and stronger communities for Calderdale council, responsible for neighbourhood, customer and cultural services*

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to Mike Bennett (SOLACE) and Tom Stannard (Blackburn and Darwen council) who gave early encouragement, and convinced me that understanding the role of local government within the big society was both important and timely. Thanks also to Andrew Whitaker (Tavistock centre for social work research) for comments on the initial proposal. Finally, I would like to give particular thanks to Leora Cruddas (Waltham Forest council). This publication grew out of our exchanges and debate in recent months

# The role of councillors



by Baroness Margaret Eaton

I want to start with the assertion that the debate about the 'big society' is an opportunity for councillors. I know that some of my fellow elected members may be more ambivalent, probably as a result of the way that this new momentum coincides with public spending cuts. I do, however, see the debate around the roll-out of the 'big society' as an opportunity to consider why we became councillors in the first place.

Most of us have complained at one time or another about how being a councillor has involved wading through endless bureaucracy and dealing with the burdens of national rules, targets and legislation. We have yearned for the freedom to respond confidently and innovatively to the needs of our communities. Of course we would have liked it even more in better economic circumstances but we certainly need all the flexibility we are getting (and more) to be able to meet today's and tomorrow's challenges.

I would argue that 'big society' is right at the centre of what we do as councillors, whatever our political affiliation. Of course we have got a foot (or at least part of one) in government

and the machinery of service delivery and local regulation – but our main focus as politicians is on our constituents. We are in a better position than anyone else, given our democratic mandate and local knowledge, to facilitate community action and mobilise communities.

## Brainwashed

Over the years, some of us may have been brainwashed into thinking that the front line or backbench councillor's role was to write 'member's enquiry' emails asking for council officer action in our ward. While there is still an important place for that local pressure on council-wide delivery, the reality of the spending cuts means that the council may not have the resources to develop additional play facilities or introduce additional crossing patrols. Our job comes into its own when we bring residents, businesses, voluntary organisations and others together in our ward to solve problems collectively and develop very localised 'bottom-up' solutions. Councillors can play the role of social entrepreneurs – for example the group of ward councillors who mobilised residents and local community groups

around Glastonbury House, a sheltered housing block for older people, to develop a community garden growing flowers, fruit and vegetables.

I think that we all know this. After all when we pledge on the doorsteps that as councillors we'll make the streets safer and cleaner, we know that good policing and street cleansing are only part of the story. Even when money was not so tight, we knew that we would only get a lasting change if local people took a bit more responsibility and local businesses got more involved.

This concept has lain behind so many of the successful ward and neighbourhood level initiatives seen through by councils in recent years – for example the “champion of place” approach adopted by Nottingham city council where local councillors have developed the role of harnessing community action on their patch.

So what of our relationship with community groups such as residents' associations and single issue pressure groups? Are they our rivals and a threat to our leadership role? Councillor Erica Kemp says: “I know that many councillors are concerned about tenants, and residents associations, and see them as a threat. It must be acknowledged that some associations do see themselves as an 'alternative' to the councillors” but she goes on to identify that her role is to ensure that those groups in the community are heard by whoever is providing services and shaping the locality, whether that is the council or other parts of the public or private sector.

So far, so positive, but what happens when different parts of the community have different interests, maybe even to

the point of conflict? We must not underestimate the importance of councillors in helping all voices to be heard, not just the loudest. Councils have played a strong role in diffusing conflict, through myth-busting, through patient and continuous dialogue, and through providing a safe space for difficult discussions, whether it is Fenland district council's work with the traveller community or work with polarised communities in Bradford and Barking and Dagenham. Councillors are able to play this role because they combine that close local attachment with a bigger picture and access to the wider information and perspective that they need to make difficult choices about resource allocation.

### **A social entrepreneur**

Councillors are key enablers of the big society, not obstacles or opponents. But despite the plethora of excellent examples, the good practice is not universal and a shift in ways of working is needed. For councillors, the skills in being a social entrepreneur, community organiser and motivator may come naturally to some while for others they may need more development. Officers, on the other hand, need to acknowledge that councillors need to be enabled and freed up to undertake this role. This means fewer burdens at the town hall, better data and intelligence at ward and neighbourhood level plus induction that introduces them to the totality of public, private and voluntary sectors in their ward as well as helping them to get right under the skin of what makes the local community tick.

This could feel like a big investment

but every councillor needs the hard evidence to balance what he or she hears first hand from the community against what service providers are saying. Staffordshire county council has established a system called 'Local View' mapping public service information locally for councillors and others, one good example among many. Maybe we also need to make better use of online social networking if we are to hold a successful dialogue with the many residents who would never attend meetings or surgeries.

Are councillors ready for this challenge? We recently asked councillors about 'big society' and what it meant for them. The results were encouraging. As one councillor said: "I think councillors will be facilitators of change. It will give people more responsibility and control rather than simply leaving it to others and pretending they don't have a role to play in society. It will empower everyone."

*Margaret Eaton became a Dame of the British Empire (DBE) in the New Year Honours List and was made a working peer in the House of Lords in July 2010. She became the first female chair of the Local Government Association in 2008 and has been a councillor on Bradford City MDC for more than 22 years, including a period as leader. She was formerly chair of the Conservative Councillors Association*

# Next practice and true public services



by Victor Adebowale

When the Conservative party first put forward the concept of 'big society' it almost created a 'so what' response. It seemed to be so obvious and based in strong community vision that to be against it would be like negating the decades of work voluntary organisations and communities across the land have been undertaking.

Now that the Conservative ideal has teamed up with Liberal Democrat community activism and community politics, the 'big society' vision has increasingly put 'big citizens' at its heart and is informed by the coalition values of freedom, fairness and responsibility.

What has created challenges has been the reluctance of its creators to actually define 'big society'. Instead they have merely underpinned it on three guiding principles: community empowerment, public service reform and social action. This has not been prescribed by central government. Rather, central government seeks to enable 'big society', to create a platform for a culture change, where people feel free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities.

But can such culture change really be

nurtured at a time when many families will be touched by the impending cuts created through the comprehensive spending review? Is this all a cover for providing services that would otherwise have been provided by the state and indeed through local government? The arguments are well rehearsed and to a certain extent I will put those to one side.

## **Do something in a different way**

For me the opportunity created by the government's commitment to 'big society' is the clear possibility to do something in a different way - not just how things have been done before, developing a palpable sense of user-led next practice in public services. But this takes confidence, and the question is whether that confidence exists when times are hard. It is far easier to pick the low hanging fruit, rather than embark on the radical overhaul of public services that might be required.

The challenge that exists to the 'big society' concept is that it immediately faces powerful vested interests. Municipal life creates a sense of ownership of public services rather than

them being true services for the people. Local authorities are clearly dedicated in serving their communities but often question whether it is truly possible to transfer service design and delivery responsibilities to communities. The threat of losing control and power is often hidden in fears of accountability and questions the ability of a community to be trusted with anything more than small pots of money. The issue is that the theory is rarely put to the test and the question is whether core public services budgets can be used differently.

It is my belief that local neighbourhood working will undoubtedly save money. 'Big society' has the potential to demonstrate that challenges can be met. If not, 'big society' will not deliver its potential.

### **Complex health and social needs**

My own experience through Turning Point's Connected Care in Hartlepool shows that this is possible. Connected Care undertook a community-led audit of experiences of people living in Owton ward in Hartlepool and their experiences of public services. A community-led social enterprise has now been created and over the past 15 months has delivered support to more than 1,200 local people with a wide range of complex health and social needs.

Connected Care in Hartlepool demonstrates how neighbourhood services can transform lives, in partnership with other local and voluntary sector organisations. Through these partnerships, built on trust and a

willingness to transfer power to communities, Connected Care in Owton has developed flexibly in response to community needs and opportunities to develop support services as they have arisen.

Without doubt, the quality of life for individuals in the local community is improving through holistic low-level support services and a team of navigators working to connect people to the service that they need. This ranges from supporting 100 elderly frail people to live independently in their own homes to supporting young people who have been homeless or at risk of being homeless in tenancies with a registered housing provider.

This example shows that by engaging intensely with the community it is possible to discover the services that are truly needed. Costs can be saved simply by providing the right public services required by the community, releasing the waste of inefficient services that do not meet need. The cost effective delivery of community based services and co-production of local services in partnership across voluntary and statutory organisations has led to the development of community capacity, confidence, self resilience and social action.

Surely this is what 'big society' is all about?

The next stage in development will depend on scaling up these ways of working.

Devolution of place-based budgets to communities with governance and

accountability so that services are designed from the ground up should give local authorities the confidence to entrust the community.

The recent announcement by the Department for Local Government and Communities of community budgets shows that there is a recognition that delivering services in communities in ways that develop community capacity and resilience and demonstrate financial effectiveness do have credibility and an understanding.

Political commitment is good but local support is critical, which leads me to conclude how 'big society' could yet play out in two ways. Only one of them will deliver the aspiration.

A 'big society' that sees a rapid withdrawal of public services, with local government and health organisations seeking to protect their own services and cuts in services being replaced with an over reliance on volunteering will create a model that may work in some areas of the country but that is unlikely to build empowered communities and social action in other areas with challenges similar to Owton in Hartlepool.

### **A poverty of opportunity**

In this scenario, a poverty of opportunity and lack of infrastructure will enable crime and gangs to move in as seen in some parts of the United States in the 1980s.

The other, more hopeful version of 'big society' is where knowledge, skills and interactions in communities are

seen to provide a better value alternative to the public resources currently being spent in neighbourhoods. A positive but different future for local people, for local authorities and other statutory partners.

So is 'big society' a risk? – potentially yes, but no more than an impenetrable resistance not to seize the chance to do something differently. Pooled budgets and shared responsibility can produce so much more than simply streamlining back office functions and deliver true public services.

*Lord Victor Adebawale is chief executive of Turning Point, the health and social care not for profit business providing services for people with complex needs, including those affected by drug and alcohol misuse, mental health problems and those with a learning disability*

# Public health: a new way forward



by Graham Burgess

For 50 years in the 19th century (1851-1901) local government in Blackburn embarked on a radical programme of brokerage and intervention to improve the health of the local population, building 30 miles of sewers, providing four waste disposal plants, purchasing infrastructure organisations for water, gas and fire, and supporting residents and volunteers to improve housing and tackle poverty.

Many of the themes from the 19th century resonate with our interpretation of 'big society' today, including an enormous challenge to improve health outcomes, civic impetus in brokering solutions, risk and market management, the centrality of democratic accountability and a coalition between private, public and voluntary sectors, delivered through a variety of new and innovative models.

While the nature of health problems have changed fundamentally in the intervening century, the verve and determination of all sectors to improve health outcomes in Blackburn with Darwen is comparable. The health white paper and the 'big society' agenda take us 'back to the future' in our role as a local

authority, with an appreciation of shared history shaping 'next practice' for both local government and health sectors.

Integration between the NHS and local government is a vital pre-requisite to facilitating community, voluntary and private sector efforts around the 'big society' in a number of ways:

**Vision:** customer need and experience must be central

Frontline service delivery through shared neighbourhood teams and ambitious, joined-up models of 'wrap-around' community care  
**Local neighbourhoods:** bringing public agencies together with local people, supporting communities to build their own capacity and ensuring equity in opportunities for communities to access funding, service and delivery opportunities

Shared intelligence to ensure fairness through broad commissioning strategies and provide a brokerage model for general practitioner consortia

**Leadership and coordination:** rationalising bureaucracy and providing clarity of direction through integrated senior management teams, embedding democratic legitimacy in Health and

Wellbeing Boards and through joint local governance arrangements in local areas.

Joint investments, focusing on the 'wider determinants' of health problems by addressing root causes.

Initiatives such as the £6m Re:fresh investment in free leisure activities for Blackburn with Darwen's residents is an excellent example of co-investment. Targeting and involving specific sections of the community in co-design of 'high-use/high value' services will, in time, mitigate separate agencies' spending escalating unsustainably to address acute symptoms of health problems.

The role of GPs, with appropriate engagement and clarity, will augment the 'big society' agenda. In their newly empowered roles as commissioners of health services, GPs are well placed to be quasi-representative of residents and, in Blackburn with Darwen, we are working hard to embed consortia alongside neighbourhood governance arrangements and shared neighbourhood service teams to enhance their local intelligence. Such localist solutions pose significant challenges to traditional community engagement models that exist within the NHS.

'Big society' represents both an opportunity and a challenge for the voluntary and community sectors. There is a need for local government and the NHS to act as one in offering bold, honest and early dialogue with partners around resourcing, governance and future commissioning arrangements.

In particular, the paradox of the 'big society' agenda being launched at a time of extreme financial austerity, with many cuts being passed on to voluntary organisations and disproportionately

affecting disadvantaged areas, is not lost on local partners. In response we can radically review financial governance arrangements, for example through our community budget project, open up commissioning arrangements and focus our funding packages around areas of high need. In short, we must therefore strive to both support civic society, and support it to reform, if the delivery of 'big society' is to match the rhetoric.

In many respects, 'big society' is a re-framing of the behaviour change concepts which have been prevalent in both health and local government sectors for many years. A key challenge in this debate is therefore to members of the public themselves, with the concept of a 'social contract' around individuals' own behaviour and attitudes to health very much part of our strategy in Blackburn with Darwen. Embedded disadvantage in many parts of the UK demands that local agencies must be more radical; going further, faster; and drawing on all sectors' resources, often simply to stand still in terms of relative performance. The temptation to retrench to silos must be resisted, as it will be a road to ruin in health and wider societal outcomes.

As such, ownership of resources is a dated concept. Partnership working is not. There is a clear leadership role for health and local government professionals as change agents of the local public state, to lead across the wider public sector, and truly engage private and voluntary sectors in this new integrated model.

*Graham Burgess is chief executive of Blackburn with Darwen borough council and NHS Care Trust plus*

# Financial consolidation



by Michael Coughlin

'We are looking at the longest, deepest, sustained period of cuts to the public services since the second world war'

*Robert Chote, Institute of Fiscal Studies*

'....a new role for the state: actively helping to create the big society; directly agitating for, catalysing and galvanising social renewal'

*David Cameron, Nov 2009*

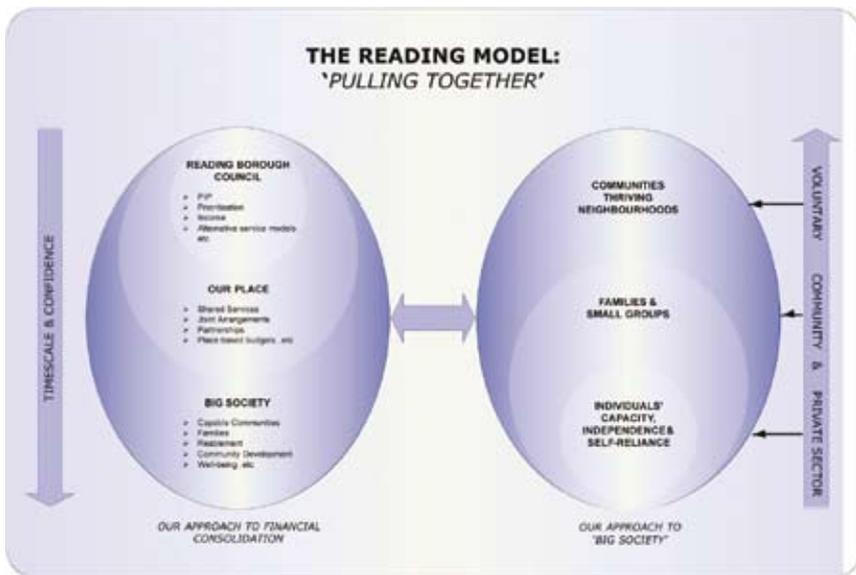
Two of the biggest, overarching policy drivers for the public sector are financial consolidation and 'big society'. The current scale and pace of change for the public sector is unprecedented in living memory. The seismic shifts taking place in structures, processes, and most importantly, relationships are so fundamental that few are fully aware of their implications and potential to completely change the public sector and how the state relates to its citizens and them to it. With the implications of the spending review at the forefront of most public sectors leaders' minds, we face unparalleled reductions in resources accompanied with the real chance to be empowered at a local level.

Uncertainty about the future of the public sector is having a disproportionate

effect on those working in it. For many, this is difficult territory in which to operate and continue to work. So many years' experience, assumptions, preconceptions and values are being challenged and left for local and/or personal determination. For others, this offers the chance to take the initiative, engage in thought leadership and take control of our destinies, within limits of course.

Public sector leaders have to take their people and their organisations forward in these times and few will have had to do so in such circumstances. Furthermore, public sector staff, and to an extent partner organisations, are looking for reassurance from their leaders and for them to make sense of the situation.

At Reading we are seeking to do just that. Our senior coalition team of Conservative and Liberal Democrat councillors, working with officers, are drawing together the themes of financial consolidation and 'big society' into an overall framework. (**See diagram, opposite**). The ellipse on the left represents our multi-layered approach to addressing financial



consolidation. The first domain represents organisational efficiency and effectiveness. We are developing options for saving up to 30% of our revenue expenditure over the next four years. A number of programmes support this, while still enabling us to deliver priority services. Rigorous prioritisation, removing waste and duplication, restructuring and de-layering, reconfiguring services, income generation, cost recovery and reducing bureaucracy are all driving down costs.

The second domain is the work we are doing across our locality, in partnership with other bodies from the public, private and voluntary and community sectors. This involves reviewing systems, services and governance across a range of activities and functions, including health and social care, community safety, children's services, and waste. We have begun to reshape services that span public sector bodies to focus on

more cost effective arrangements.

Finally, the outer domain represents the work we are doing with individuals and communities that seeks to ensure that they are able to lead healthier, positive and 'pro-social' lives and contribute to the life of their community(ies) and the democratic process.

The domains are interrelated set against a continuum of 'time' and 'confidence' that runs from shorter time frames and greater confidence of successful outcomes, to longer time frames and lower confidence of successful outcomes over an assumed 10-year period.

The ellipse on the right represents the activity we are developing or undertaking to develop our own 'big society'. The lower domain represents the work being done at an individual level to encourage positive lifestyles, independence, self-reliance, emotional, physical and

mental health and well-being. Our activity is increasingly drawing on more recent work around 'Nudge', the Social Brain, meta-cognition, 'steer' and behavioural economics.

The next domain represents the work we do with families, but also with 'small groups', typically six to eight people, in different parts of our communities. Our innovation unit ethnography pilot is recording people's self-expressed experience of living in south Reading, creating a better understanding of life as actually lived and informing how services do or don't meet needs or even have relevance to those they are intended to benefit.

Finally, the outer domain represents the work that we do with our wider neighbourhoods and communities of interest and at times the whole town. For instance, through our cultural partnership we are creating a community movement based on the concept that the values and identity of a place are inseparable from the behaviour of its citizens. This is being supported by the development of our leisure card into a pro-social behaviour, personal reward and/or community benefit scheme. The role of the voluntary sector in this domain cannot be underestimated. The role of businesses in our community is also critical. Organisations like Connect Reading bring businesses and communities together, offering businesses the opportunity to use their skills to improve people's lives in local areas.

The activity in this ellipse is aimed at supporting the development of communities across our town that can, in the interests of their livelihoods, quality of life and well-being, develop and demonstrate autonomy, democratic engagement, communal action and community innovation. The 'read-across' from one ellipse to the other indicates the strong relationship between them and the need to reference work in any one part to the others.

Our model is a 'meta-framework' into which programmes can be located, to give them shape and where possible, align them, to create a greater focus on the policies and outcomes we are aiming to achieve.

Our model provides clarity of thinking, and a logical, common-sensical representation of a complex set of agendas, helping people see their role in a wider context and forecast this into the next practice future for public services. It has helped people see new relationships and encouraged them to develop these in support of our overall objectives: value for money, customer service and civic aspiration.

These are early days and we recognise the substantial challenges ahead. Views on the value of the 'Reading model' would be appreciated, as we develop our approach and become a model council for the decade ahead.

*Michael Coughlin became chief executive at Reading council in June 2008*

# Take part, take pride



by Sean Brennan

For the London borough of Sutton many of the emerging themes of 'big society' are not new. Our selection as a vanguard authority reflects the successful approaches we have adopted across the whole council and this is typified in our preparations for the cold weather, where we have handed out free grit to residents for collection so that they can grit side roads and pavements themselves.

Our 'big society' credentials are embedded, and our vision for the past 24 years has been about building a community in which all can take part and take pride. But it's not all leafy suburbia in Sutton - we also have significant pockets of deprivation where more of our residents do not feel engaged and feel less connected to each other and their local community.

As a start we are committed to four key signature projects:

**Traffic and transport** - to give people greater power over traffic and transport schemes in their communities and influence spending from bus services and trains to speed humps and yellow lines.

**The Sutton Life Centre** - using our

recently opened Sutton Life Centre which focuses on the citizenship skills and the needs of younger people to deploy their new found skills to take a lead role in their local community.

**Community champions** - working with residents to develop the first UK eco-suburb based on the innovative Beddington Zero Energy Development (BedZED). We will be looking at ways to give greater inclusion and influence to residents in the Hackbridge Community Forum, creating zero carbon energy networks, developing community involvement in the management of the River Wandle and an area of Metropolitan Open Land.

**Local health** - to make health services truly local, key opportunities for us include a Big Sutton Debate with our residents about what they want public health priorities to be and how they want to be involved in co-designing and co-producing delivery along with the early adoption of other key elements of the NHS white paper.

These 'council' projects are just the beginning. We are designating next year as the year of the volunteer and are encouraging more people to come

forward, like one local resident who has taken over the care of some flower beds and a local church leader who wants to develop her work with older people. These are great examples of where our local residents are up for taking a greater role in their local community.

So what does the 'big society' mean in Sutton?

### Behaviour change

We are leading a new debate about taking a 'big society' approach to our work - and that means looking at what we do and how we do it through a new lens, which is where it truly becomes our form of next practice. We want to make sure that our approaches reach out to those people who traditionally have felt less involved and disempowered. This is about a new drive to encourage behaviour change to allow our residents to make smarter choices - through our new gritting arrangements, cashless parking, healthy eating, travel choices or delivering our ground breaking community library project where residents share their own books. In Sutton, our approach to behaviour change has always been about the carrot rather than the stick, the nudge rather than regulation or legislation.

Second, it is about devolving decision-making as close as possible to local communities and individuals. Our vanguard role gives us a platform from which to continue to build on our work with local committees which has seen £3m devolved to allow local residents to determine public realm improvements.

A key aspect in devolving decision-making in this way is the community leadership role for our local ward councillors.

Third, it is about even closer collaboration with, and between the local authority, voluntary sector and the private sector. We are determined to make the most of the opportunities we have to shape our response to the spending review in partnership rather than in isolation and entrenchment. Our local voluntary sector are already working with us, at the earliest possible stage, to help reshape our youth services, services for older people and childrens' commissioning.

Fourth, we care about cutting red tape - ours and encouraging national government to cut theirs. We will be talking to our community to agree what barriers should be dismantled to enable those groups and individuals who want to help build a stronger society. We are also trying really hard to cut our bureaucracy and focus much more on what our services look and feel like to our residents.

Fifth, the 'big society' approach gives us the opportunity to rethink our work to support new models of service delivery. Sutton has had a small but relatively effective track record of successful social enterprise and we want to do more to be clear about how we can create the conditions for social entrepreneurs to thrive.

Finally, it's about openness and transparency across all of our work. We want to be an open council - and that

means openness about our data, our decision-making, spending, delivery and performance.

Taking a 'big society' approach brings its own challenges - and the biggest of these is about overcoming cynicism. Every council will want to work out for itself what the 'big society' means for them and their communities. It will mean different things to different areas, depending upon their past, their history of relationships with residents, voluntary sector and their local politics. That is why above all we welcome no guidance, statutory or otherwise. But it also feels that we are all coming out slightly blinking to a world where there are few rules and set directions. So when our local voluntary sector looks to us for the answers, we are starting to say 'tell us what you want to do and we will try and support you'.

*Councillor Sean Brennan is the Sutton Vanguard champion for the 'big society'. He was first elected in 1986 and became leader of the council in 2002. Over the years he has been a member of all the major committees and was mayor in 1990. He is vice chair of London Councils*

# Delivering the 'big society'



by Gavin Jones

The 'big society' resonates deeply with a shared commitment made by Swindon borough council and partners to fundamentally change the relationship between the people of Swindon and their local public services. We see the new relationship as being typified by meaningful engagement, locally sensitive services and a sense of community.

Recognising ourselves as part of the system we want to change, we are determined to develop new practice by modelling and encouraging humility, experimentation, and learning. The essence of our approach is captured in a single breakthrough question:

"How can we learn together what hope, trust, respect and responsibility mean to Swindon communities, and build on that together to make a difference?"

We call this approach 'Connecting People Connecting Places', because it signals to a number of audiences a willingness to listen deeply to local people and a commitment to change the way in which we understand and respond to people's needs and potential. We recognise that this

process is challenging as it fundamentally changes the way our local public sector organisations operate.

Our shared commitment is reflected in a number of promising new practice prototypes and pilots, which we recognise have the potential to catalyse fundamental change in our public services. One such example is LIFE (building new Lives for Individuals and Families to Enjoy), which offers a glimpse of next practice in public services.

## **By families for families**

LIFE was developed by families for families and was based on a hyper-local approach of spending six months living in a small community and shadowing frontline workers. Initially working with 12 families over several months to develop and prototype LIFE, it is now being piloted over a year with 11 families comprising some 40 individual family members. It is planned to increase the number of families over the next six months

The 'families in chronic crisis' that we worked with live from day to day

experiencing a complex mixture of serious problems and an on-going pattern of crisis: domestic violence, children with a child protection plan, debt, poor living conditions, feuds with their neighbours, alcohol misuse, the threat of homelessness, and exclusion. Antisocial behaviour was common but these families have often been victims themselves, are isolated from support networks, live in fear, have numerous and serious mental, physical and emotional health issues and, importantly, have never known a different life. Like a gyroscope, there is constant activity around the family in reaction to a crisis, but at a deeper level, at the core, the families remain unmoved - unchanged. It's often a generational issue, as their parents and grandparents before them, their siblings, children and grandchildren grow into the same patterns.

The costs these families incur, across multiple agencies are proportionately enormous: estimated at over £250,000 per family per year. The majority of this money is spent with little sustainable impact.

The prototype helped us to see that the way the system has evolved has frontline workers spending their time on the system itself, rather than the kind of relationships that open people to change and address causes rather than symptoms. We found that 80% of workers' time is spent on the system itself and only 20% in relationship with the residents we intend to support.

This means that next to no time is spent on a relationship that supports change. Most interventions focus on one family member and in relation to one

aspect of the problem - neglect, alcohol abuse, violence, etc - the agenda of the system, not the family.

We needed to strip away some of these 'systems' to take risks in developing a new relationship between local government and residents that starts from a different place and supports transformation for the families and for ourselves. LIFE signifies next practice in its core user-focus - empowering families to build and sustain the lives they want to lead through a number of enablers: the ability to value yourself and to become aware of what holds you back; a sense of agency and possibility; the ability to develop meaningful relationships and build new connections within your community.

### **Support system**

This has been achieved by re-designing the support system around the family, offering a new type of team of key workers working with the families in a radically different way. Core to developing the family member's capabilities is the relationship, built between the families and the LIFE team, giving families the means and the space to change. LIFE focuses on changing the mindset and skillset of frontline workers and this change results in next practice service redesign.

LIFE is not service delivery in the traditional sense. It gives families the strengths, stories and relationships required for fundamental behaviour change. It builds connections and opportunities in the wider community for families to 'live in to'. It changes wider system structures so that the

programme, our communities and the families themselves, are given space to thrive.

LIFE has proved there's an opportunity to do something for less cost with greater impact.

Based on conservative estimates of cost and potential for change by the end of the LIFE programme:

In 2008, on one family, a minimum of £183,080 was spent by services on engagement, monitoring, reporting and delivery of services, and those costs were expected to continue

In 2009-10, more than £300,000 was saved based on changes in the first 15 months of the programme. These savings would build over time as the families disengage from numerous enforcement actions and other consequences of their previous behaviour

The LIFE programme cost was £17,000 per family during the first 15 months of the programme

Our experience to date illustrates how the local authority can be an enabler, within a support system where the family, household and community come first. It heralds a reform of public service that realises a positive engagement for local government in the 'big society'.

*Gavin Jones is chief executive of Swindon borough council. He joined Swindon borough council in 2004, having previously worked in a variety of private sector organisations and has been chief executive since 2006*

# School improvement



by Leora Cruddas

'Rather than being an interpreter, the scientist who embraces a new paradigm is like the man (sic) wearing inverting lenses.' *Thomas Kuhn (The Structure of Scientific Revolutions)*

We are seeing a paradigm shift in school improvement, heralding a new relationship with local authorities. In the accepted paradigm, a centrist-driven set of national strategies is the instruments by which teaching and learning – and therefore schools – are improved. Local authority school improvement services have been the instruments of this top-down approach. Attainment data has shown a national improvement trend in the last 10 years, and it is certainly true that many schools have benefited from a relentless focus on teaching and learning, assessment and tracking.

However there are anomalies – schools are not improving at similar rates. In some cases, even where schools 'do what they are told' in the command and control paradigm, progress is slow or negligible. There is still too much variation within the system. This has led to consecutive governments introducing greater powers of intervention. The current reform of public services offers

scope for a new understanding of what we mean by school improvement.

David Hargreaves argues in a recent publication (*Creating a self-improving school system, 2010*) that we need to shift our focus from the 'self-managing school' to the self-improving system; from individual organisational capacity to system capacity. I suggest that this is a paradigm shift - from organisational to system capacity.

## Optical illusion

Kuhn used the duck-rabbit optical illusion to illustrate the way in which a paradigm shift helps us to see the same information in a new way. The paradigm shift in school improvement requires not simply a different theory of school improvement, but a new discourse – a new way of talking about improvement, new behaviours and new systems. It requires the search for 'next practice' rather than 'best practice.'

CK Prahalad defines next practice in three parts:

Firstly it is future-orientated; secondly, no institution or company is an exemplar of everything that you think will happen; and third it is about ampli-

fying weak signals, connecting the dots. Next practice is disciplined imagination. (Prahalad, 2004, <http://www.innovationunit.org/next-practice/what-is-next-practice.html>)

The Innovation Unit has a history of engaging schools in next practice solutions. However, as a methodology, it is helpful to use next practice techniques to support the disciplined imagination of public services, in particular school improvement.

### Connecting the dots

Even if possible in light of the schools white paper, it is not sufficient merely to re-shape the tools of school improvement to focus on improved performance and delivery. There may be little or no need for local authority school improvement services as they are currently configured and delivered. So we are left with the question of how we create a sustainable and coherent self-improving system. How do we connect the dots and amplify the weak signals?

One response may be to co-produce our next practice system. While the dominant theories of co-production focus on 'delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and neighbours' (Boyle *et al.*, 2010), it is possible and desirable to apply the principles of co-production at an organisational level in a self-improving system.

There are some relatively strong signals shifting towards self-improvement. The National College has developed an

approach to system capacity-building through national leaders of education, who are outstanding school leaders. In addition to leading their own schools, these leaders increase the leadership capacity of other schools.

Another strong signal is the leadership strategies developed in London, Greater Manchester and the Black Country, which extend the role of national leaders to support system-wide leadership. They involve the identification, training and deployment of local leaders of education. The leadership strategies include a range of school-to-school programmes to support the system. This approach resonates with the concept of the big society – school leaders joining together to improve the system.

The challenge for local authorities is that this system works best at national and regional levels, as the pool of national and local leaders is sustainable across a region and a level of sophistication in relation to matching is best achieved regionally. What therefore might be the local authority role in a self-improving system?

The crisis of legitimacy facing the current school improvement discourse might be a manifestation of the paradigm shifting. The process was apparent before the new government, but there is now added impetus and a new legislative context and policy direction.

Michael Gove, the secretary of state for education, has made it clear that he sees a strong strategic role for local authorities. The Academies Act, 2010 is the legislative framework for new-style

academies and enables new providers to enter the system. In this context, the Local Government Association (LGA) has argued that it is more not less important that there is good local oversight of the education system. However, this cannot mean school improvement services doing what they have always done, but with fewer resources.

### **Competition between providers**

If in 'big society' terms the state is retrenching, then accountability, regulation and quality assurance are key strategic roles for local authorities. The LGA has stated that the goal of improving educational outcomes cannot just be left to competition between education providers. Freedom from local authority control is a big idea driving the academy principle – this has sparked concerns about a two-tier system of education. A proper role of local government is holding providers of public services, including schools, in the locality to account on behalf of the local community. This should include independent and private providers delivering public services. In other words, this should include academy providers.

In the health white paper, the government commits to increasing local democratic legitimacy. Through elected members, local authorities bring greater local democratic legitimacy to education. Local authorities can take a broad, effective and efficient view of education commissioning and improvement. As commissioners, local

authorities are uniquely placed to hold the family of schools to account and regulate the system.

*Leora Cruddas is the deputy director of children and young peoples' services at the London borough of Waltham Forest. For the past 18 months, Leora has led a process with education leaders in the locality to co-produce Waltham Forest's 'next practice' in school improvement*

# What does it mean for social care?



by Andrew Whittaker

*'Do not ask what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.'* John F Kennedy

The 'big society' is an idea that has attracted significant criticism. It has been regarded as a cynical attempt to put a positive spin on the impending miserable years of austerity and place responsibility back on communities unhappy with cuts in services

Alternatively, it has been viewed as drawing upon sentimentalised notions of community in an idealistic attempt to call citizens to arms, redolent of the war years.

What is clear is that the 'big society' intends to change the nature of the relationship between the state and the citizen. It consists of interlinked ideas that are happening simultaneously with funding cuts, but which derive from thinking evolved over a number of years which are both ideologically and conceptually separate. It also signals the present government's attempt to distance themselves from the legacy of the Thatcherite years, by seeking to value rather than denigrate the role of civic society.

The key elements appear to be

greater participation by local communities combined with a reduction in monitoring, auditing and performance management in the spirit of letting professionals 'get on with it'. While the former has received more media attention, the latter is at least as radical and more likely to be influential.

Little has been written about the impact of the 'big society' on one of the most significant and in recent times highest profile services provided by local government and other statutory partners – children's social care.

## **Safeguarding children**

This is despite the fact that the Munro review of child protection is seeking to challenge the role of the state in safeguarding children. The first part of the review was recently published, with the full results due in April 2011. There has been growing evidence of the Integrated Children's System (ICS) being overly cumbersome, resulting in social workers spending 80% of their time in front of computer screens (*Peckover et al., 2008*).

In the first stage of her review, Munro concludes that piecemeal changes in

response to child death inquiries have resulted in a system where social workers are too focused on complying with overly-prescriptive procedures (Munro, 2010). Consequently, social workers need more autonomy, more support and understanding, and less prescription and censure. While this is an attractive proposition for practitioners, managers and the public, it is necessary to consider the nature of local government to understand some of the implications.

### Reasons to be fearful

"Anxiety is the prime force acting on the social work profession" (Baistow *et al*, 1995, p.111).

Local authorities can be anxious, stressful places, particularly in the current climate so it is important to consider how this stress and anxiety is understood and managed. There are three main sources of anxiety. The first is 'professional anxiety', which relates to the stressful nature of working with service users and their families in difficult personal circumstances. Managers have the challenging task of supporting workers who can find this challenging and frustrating and who may turn their own frustration onto the organisation.

The second source is 'rationing anxiety', which arises from the difficult decisions that must be made when the resources available do not meet the needs and expectations of service users. Doubts about the sustainability of the post-war welfare state experienced during the 1980s have reached acute levels in the current financial crisis.

The third and more recent source is

'performance anxiety', generated by the performance management and accountability systems at work in public bodies. The initial phase of the Munro review has received evidence from local authority managers that current organisational cultures encourage managers to 'manage for inspection', rather than for providing quality services. It is argued that these regulatory systems have become 'hungry beasts', consuming a disproportionate amount of time, energy and resources.

Indeed, all three sources of anxiety could be thought of as 'hungry beasts'. As each grows or reduces, they require different levels of attention and resources. While the first source of anxiety, professional anxiety, remains reasonably constant, the other two sources of anxiety are subject to more fluctuation. For example, the recent comprehensive spending review has served to stir up rationing anxiety that will require increased time and attention to manage. At such a stressful time, the idea of the regulatory beast having a 'gastric band' is an attractive proposition, though caution is advised.

One of the most significant challenges in realising the 'big society' will be the management of public expectations. Webb (2006) argues the public expects central and local authorities to be 'omnicompetent', but the impossibility of this in our complex world provokes governments to respond to crises by creating ever more systems of accountability.

Nowhere is this more acute than in children's social care. Following the Maria Colwell inquiry in 1974, the media

response had the slogan 'it must never happen again'. There are few other crimes where such a belief could be regarded as realistic. The suggestion that there will never be another burglary or street crime would be generally regarded as absurd. Yet the existence of this expectation is testament to the terrible nature of child murder and our disbelief that such acts are possible in a civilised society, rather than any reasonable belief that this is achievable.

Expectations from the public and partnership organisations will be central to the adoption of a 'next practice' rather than best practice approach. If we were on board a plane and found that the flight technology was very 'innovative', we might feel a certain level of concern. Yet we are aware the current system is not working so 'more of the same' is not an attractive option.

### **Real innovation**

The Munro review offers the potential to develop the 'next practice' agenda by supporting innovation and a greater appetite for risk. In the coming months we will see whether the 'big society' can deliver real innovation and can enable us to rethink how children's social care is delivered. At a time when memories of the cuts of the 1980s are reawakened, the present government will want to avoid the claim that history repeats itself, occurring first as tragedy, the second time as farce.

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● With thanks to Tony McCaffrey and Stephen Briggs at the Centre for Social Work Research for assistance and support in writing this article

# Thoughts from the voluntary sector



by Soo Nevison

While the 'big society' has been a constant refrain since May, very little detail has appeared, and I am left feeling that local authorities and their partners should 'just get on with it. There is little point waiting for 'next practice' - it is in our hands to shape it.

Under the ethos of the 'big society', Calderdale already delivers some of the ideas in true partnership. 'Big society day' for Calderdale is our annual Neighbours' Day. We hold an annual recognition event for volunteers and other social action activities, such as Incredible Edible Todmorden, have achieved national acclaim for new forms of collaborative and sustainable living. With Hebden Bridge town hall, we have pioneered asset transfer and have a strong enabling framework to achieve community ownership of assets. Community empowerment work is embedded through our ward forums, healthy and thriving communities of interest networks, discussions around locality budgets and our recent council budget consultation that asks hard questions regarding public services in the future.

But in relation to public service reform, Calderdale has further to go.

There is a clear appetite between the local authority and health to develop new models of delivery, and a stronger emphasis on commissioning instead of traditional provision, harnessing social enterprise and the voluntary sector. There is a risk that the voluntary sector will be regarded as an easy option to save money; others will see it as a threat to their own livelihoods. The sector that once annoyed the public bodies for being 'cap in hand' has now seen a shift in the balance of the relationship where many solutions will need our involvement to succeed. This is new territory for us all. Within the voluntary and community sector there exist massive opportunities for real sustainability, but this may come at some cost. Those of us in the sector feel that the time has come for us to stand up and be counted. Public service reform is a balance of opportunity versus adversity, including such challenges as TUPE, and maybe it is only for the brave?

## **Moving forward**

To move forward together, we need to get on with it, with a clear, shared direction and at a pace that suits us all.

Now is not a time to be slow and drag our heels but equally it is not a time to be rash, benefitting from hindsight later. To change models of service delivery needs education and support, both for those who deliver those services now and those looking to become the next guardians of them, regardless of which sector they work in at the moment.

This is not about someone being unfit to deliver; it is a new era of reduced spending, maximising impact and delivering outcomes. Gone are the days of 'numbers through the door' as we seek to make a difference in our communities to those who need it most.

'Big society' lends the opportunity for grassroots organisations and communities to come to the fore. However, what appetite exists for this?

### Assessments and strategies

Historically, services have been delivered based on assessments and strategies. In the future there will be an even greater emphasis on engaging with communities to ensure needs are met. Perhaps its time to embrace the Square Mile idea of 'big society' to develop next practice ways of assessing impact, based upon people's stories and sense of place. We can all learn from the voluntary sector the next practice idea of acting without hard evidence; we have often 'piloted' ideas, based upon soft evidence.

So why did we in the voluntary sector move forward? Because of our innate ability to listen to our communities and work with them to provide solutions.

This is a skill that needs developing and nurturing and it will be interesting to see how this skill is shared by statutory partners in the future, as it is felt in some parts of the voluntary sector that this is our 'magic' ingredient - that thing you can't describe but know is crucial to your success.

### Risk aversion and siloed thinking

One of the biggest challenges for our public sector partners is to lessen risk aversion and siloed thinking. Putting your head above the parapet and looking outwards is scary, but is not also exciting? The voluntary sector has traditionally been creative and innovative and has had to take its chances where it has seen them. This has led to failure at times, but crucially we have learnt from our mistakes. This is true learning that we can share with our public sector partners in the coming months as they learn how to deliver their traditional services in non-traditional ways as part of delivering the 'big society'.

I believe passionately that the reform of public services is about synergy not competition. We will be better served using and building upon the tools that already exist, such as our award winning Compact. Commitment to work in partnership needs to be high on the agenda and it is the understanding of the word partnership that is crucial. Historically the voluntary sector has seen itself as an unequal partner and this mindset needs to be shifted. If service delivery is moved into locality delivery models it will require respect from all partners about

what each brings to the table, alongside a genuine joint will and desire to make a difference in our communities. The voluntary sector is able to offer reach into the heart of communities that the 'big society' depends on, but equally needs to acknowledge the skills set of public sector employees who have worked alongside us for so long.

So what is the future like in Calderdale? Our voluntary and community sector here have the benefit of an understanding of our value in the district teamed with respect from our public bodies. This is not the case everywhere and we need to be mindful of the good start we have. Without it fragmentation and chaos are a real risk, and the most vulnerable people in our communities will be those who suffer the most.

*Dr Soo Nevison is the chief officer of Voluntary Action Calderdale. She has worked in the voluntary sector in both paid and unpaid roles since 1991, spending the majority of this time in drug rehabilitation services until 2006, when she took up her current role*

# Catalysts for change



by Toby Blume

When the Conservatives' 'big society' plan was first published it included a commitment to support 'the training of 5,000 independent community organisers'.

Though the 'national army' of community organisers' was lampooned in some quarters, the prime minister, David Cameron, has continued to champion the idea of community organising as a key component of the vision for the 'big society'. So where has this idea come from, and what are the implications for local public services?

The US writer and activist Saul Alinsky is widely credited with coming up with the term 'community organiser'. Alinsky worked with poor neighbourhoods in Chicago from the late 1930s and subsequently set out a framework for community organising in his 1971 book *Rules for Radicals*. Alinsky's model of community organising is now successfully employed throughout the world, including in the UK by organisations like Citizens UK. This is not the only model of community organising and a similarly effective approach based on Paulo Friere's work, is used by organisations like RE:generate Trust.

I was somewhat surprised when I saw references to community organising in the Conservatives' 'big society' paper. Alinsky, though never affiliated to any political party, has tended to be seen as fairly left-wing and his approach has more commonly been adopted by social democratic groups.

## 'Obama magic dust'

I wondered why this relatively obscure US community activist was now being championed by Cameron's Conservatives. It is perhaps cynical to suggest they were cashing in on the association of community organising with President Obama, who had just been swept to power on a popular 'change' agenda. But was there more to it than simply wanting to sprinkle 'Obama magic dust' over their election campaign?

Alinsky presented *Rules for Radicals* as a handbook '... for the Have-Nots on how to take it [power] away'. Central to community organising is the recognition of the importance of power dynamics and inequalities. Its aim is nothing less than a redistribution of power and the challenge to those who hold power is

inherently adversarial. Alinsky was unambiguous on this, saying; 'A people's organization is a conflict group, [and] this must be openly and fully recognized'.

Given the value Conservative thought places on tradition and established institutions, it seemed strange to see the advocacy of something so explicitly aimed at shaking up the natural order. However, if we look at the scale of the Conservatives' ambition in social and political reform, as manifested in 'big society' and localism, the community organising model begins to make sense. Eight months into the coalition government, there is compelling evidence of a desire to radically redesign public services in localities (and in particular local government), and the role of community organisers could provide a powerful lever to precipitate change and deliver next practice.

It is worth reminding ourselves that the last government also set out with some pretty ambitious policy objectives - seeking to 'narrow the gap' between the most disadvantaged and the rest of the population. Despite modest success, its goal remained unrealised. Any government faces considerable challenges in realising its agenda, particularly when it wants to achieve fundamental transformative change. Change generally requires a catalyst - a disruption or disruptor - to generate a sense of urgency and necessity, without which the status quo remains hard to budge.

Community organisers can therefore be seen as the coalition government's disruptors - the catalysts for change in communities - that will 'put the cat

among the pigeons'. They offer a challenge to all those who hold power, whether in local government, the private sector or the voluntary and community sector.

As a strategy for affecting change, I believe it makes a lot of sense. If you want things to change, you have to shake things up. And if that initially creates chaos, then out of the chaos will emerge a new 'big society' paradigm, equipped to deliver co-design and co-production and a new relationship between citizens and the state. My fear though, is that some areas will not make a smooth transition to this brave new world, but instead will become stuck at the chaos stage, unable to go beyond conflict. If this happens we risk areas being written off for a generation as, given the current economic climate, the consequences of not changing are dire.

### **Traditional power**

How local government and the voluntary and community sector react to the challenges to traditional power will go a long way to determining whether we move beyond chaos. No doubt many will see the potential redistribution of power as a threat and we should not be under any illusion that this will go unchallenged. However, local government cannot afford to be myopic about the current situation. If one regards power not as some finite resource that can be doled out by the powerful to the marginalised, but as something that can be grown for the benefit of the community at large, then we can embrace the opportunities that community organising brings.

Social, economic and technological

change makes it incredibly difficult to predict how our political institutions and democracy will alter in the future. Traditional working silos will need to be broken down and if we are successful the boundaries between consumer and provider will become increasingly blurred.

Despite a lack of clarity over the role of local government in the 'big society' to date, there is a crucial role for councils and in particular councillors to play in supporting citizens and communities. The scarcity of resources inevitably means competing priorities and a balancing of interests and compromise. Mediating these tensions could become a primary role for councillors within the 'big society', as could be a productive link and not a conflict with a new form of social activism through community organisers. This will require a new set of skills and ways of working. Time is not on our side and we need to move quickly to respond to short-term pressures that will determine the prospects for long term change.

*Toby Blume has worked in the voluntary and community sector for almost 20 years. He joined Urban Forum as its chief executive in 2004, having previously set up Groundswell, a charity helping homeless people to run community projects throughout the UK. He is a member of the Communities and Local Government Department's voluntary and community sector partnership board and was a member of the beacon awards advisory panel*

# Building resilience in the community



by Ewan King

The Prevent strategy - the policy framework that aims to prevent people supporting or becoming terrorists - has borne the brunt of widespread criticism since it was launched in 2008. The strategy has been characterised as both unworkable, and highly divisive - stigmatising the very people it aims to support - Muslim communities across England.

Taking this criticism seriously, the coalition government is now reviewing the strategy, with a revised version due in January. While the signs are encouraging about the new approach, we are not yet clear how the new strategy will work in practice.

Part of the answer may lie in the coalition's belief in creating an integrated society. Theresa May, the Home Secretary, recently said: "Stopping radicalisation depends on an integrated society. We can all play a part in defeating extremism by defending British values and speaking out against the false ideologies of the extremists."

The other part of the answer may lie with the 'big society' agenda, which with its focus on active citizens, may offer

fertile ground on which to build more resilient communities.

## Tackling the risks

For any agenda to be successful, it has to be able to deal with causes of violent extremism. Academic and research communities both agree that there is no single path to violent extremism. It is widely accepted that there are many powerful risk factors that can provide fertile conditions in which extremism can thrive. Foreign policy grievances are probably at the top of this list and arguably not something that can be addressed by a locally driven agenda. However, there are other risk factors commonly cited in the research which have a local bearing. These include polarisation, discrimination and low levels of civic engagement.

## Integration and extremism

The notion that integration can form a buttress against extremism is worth exploring. Integration, through concentrating efforts on reducing language barriers, bringing different people together to tackle shared problems, and promoting "shared

values", could significantly mitigate some of the risk factors described above. For example, the London borough of Waltham Forest has taken its successful young Muslim leaders programme (funded through Prevent) and broadened it out to include training for young people of all faiths and backgrounds. Guided by a strong focus on integration, this programme is deliberately seeking to promote cross-community collaboration and action.

### The role of 'big society'

The 'big society', about which we know more than the government's tentative thinking on integration, could make a contribution in at least three areas.

First, 'big society' could address one of the most entrenched factors associated with extremism - deeply held grievances. Extremist groups of all stripes are highly skilled at seeking out and exploiting grievances. They do this to divide people into opposing factions. Often people who feel aggrieved hold this view because they don't fully understand the nature of the grievance, or have never had the opportunity to explore the problem from different perspectives. For advocates of 'big society', there is a real opportunity to harness the renewed focus on community empowerment and civic engagement to help tackle these grievances. For example, "community dialogues" can be a powerful tool for addressing community grievances, giving people not only the opportunity to vent their frustrations safely, but also

to learn about how other people feel about the grievance.

Second, the agenda can promote meaningful civic participation. There is evidence to suggest that young people often turn to extremist groups as a means of empowerment as these groups encourage a perverted form of political activism, social action and collaboration. Experiences of discrimination, deprivation and alienation from wider society can leave these young people looking for an outlet through which to express their opinions. 'Big society', with its focus on community organising, offers both renewed impetus for public services and a route through which people can take a more active role in their communities and have the power and skills to actually make a difference.

Third, 'big society' can foster inter-faith dialogue, and this is where the links between this agenda and integration are most apparent. Extremists enjoy debunking the view that different communities can get along and find common ground. 'Big society', with its focus on inter-faith collaboration and social mixing can help to counter these arguments, but public services need to operate differently in localities and avoid the risk of a defensive and protective response, embracing the user focus and appetite for a thoughtful approach to risk.

Looking to the future the 'big society' agenda has significant potential to build integrated communities and help mitigate some of the risk factors associated with violent extremism. It

represents a route towards next practice in community resilience with a key role for local government as agents of community leadership. But it will not necessarily provide all the answers. Some targeted and specialist work, for example with young Muslims in prison, will always be required.

There is also the danger that 'big society' may miss the target completely, by inadvertently becoming the preserve for those who are far less likely to become extremists in the first place - the prosperous, the well integrated, the highly engaged (although some terrorists have come from prosperous backgrounds too).

To have a real and lasting impact on extremism, in a new policy environment of integration and prevent there is a need to reach out to all communities, especially those where there are low levels of integration and civic participation.

*Ewan King is director of the analytical studies unit at the Office for Public Management. He has worked with the Home Office, Department for Communities and Local Government, and the Department for Education as well as many local authorities on the Prevent agenda*

# The role of faith communities



by Fiyaz Mughal

Faith communities have been 'doing' 'big society' for many decades, whether as part of developing better relations between and within them or whether through supporting what we would regard today as citizenship. They have been actively involved in financial and social inclusion and have been at the helm of supporting some of the most socially excluded in society, such as asylum seekers.

The driving factor for faith communities has been the desire to alleviate poverty and helplessness and to induce in people a sense of self worth and social justice. While these values are identical in many ways to those who choose to have no faith and who choose to support social justice within society, faith communities have 'branded' themselves over many millennia as being the purveyors of such values, whether they be from Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist or Christian communities and this has intensified over the past 40 years.

Where does this lead us in today's climate of financial austerity and what is the new next practice element for public services? 'Big society' is a vision driven by some basic themes. These

include getting people to work together for common good within local areas. It also includes support for volunteering and greater partnership between public, private and third sector organisations with the need to promote integration of communities and societies within the mainstream. All of these are laudable objectives and will shape the future delivery of services that could be provided by faith communities.

It is worth considering what is already in place. Some faith communities have come together to develop housing associations so that social housing provision focuses on those most in need within communities. Others provide pastoral and spiritual care, micro-lending without large burdensome interest, creating social networks and employment opportunities through work with faith institutions. It is clear that much of this work is not trumpeted or promoted even though it continues day in and day out.

With finances and grants increasingly becoming difficult to come by, the role of faith communities in supporting civil society and social development will become even more acute. Donations will be expected to stretch further and

greater volunteering will be asked for from individuals who are sometimes already giving most of their time to faith-led charities. A change in strategy is needed that will involve a formalisation of services provided by faith-led communities. This will mean formal structures being set up and reinforced through strong administration, as well as more effective marketing and targeting of services. Aims and objectives of existing services will need to be re-evaluated to fit in with the aims and objectives of statutory commissioners and this will open up new markets and opportunities for faith groups. Despite the financial crisis, there are real opportunities for well-run, credible organisations to step in and to run public services given their user focus, cost effectiveness and scope for community-led innovation.

The second positive impact of such organisations stepping into the breach will be to promote better cohesion and integration. The impact of such organisations undertaking public sector services will effectively be to bring communities together. Take, for instance, an organisation run by Muslims, providing social services such as care for the elderly within the west Midlands. What greater example could there be of communities getting on and sending out a powerful message of joint citizenship and responsibility within local areas? Such examples are not only powerful symbols of what can be achieved, they are also powerful antidotes to those who seek to create division and mistrust and undermine those who seek to demonise all Muslims and Islam.

Public sector financial constraints will mean that resources will need to

be pooled together. Funding ratios on projects will have to alter radically with new forms of finance coming from faith communities shifting power relationships and offering new opportunities for collaboration local authorities and other statutory services need to grasp. Such an economic shift though also needs a change in mindsets as the state reviews its level of responsibility and accountability in localities. It is this review of the role of state which is driving the process and the 'big society' should be seen through the lens of a re-appraisal and consolidation of boundaries between a large and all encompassing state and one which takes specific positions and leaves others to social market forces.

The future of public services is one of greater innovation where faith communities have a role to play in engaging communities, delivering services and creating next practice approaches in local areas. We are not starting from scratch here. Next steps involve reappraising engagement with statutory bodies and potentially delivering core services if this is best outcome for the end user. This radical new direction also involves looking at provision in creative ways through stronger partnerships and engagement with local and corporate businesses through time banks, volunteering and advice banks. The future is certainly going to be difficult, but presents real opportunities for those in both local authorities and faith communities willing to be innovative and think beyond the box!

*Fiyaz Mughal OBE is the founder and director of Faith Matters (faith-matters.org)*

# The rehabilitation revolution



by Fergus McNeill

Perhaps because I am a former local authority social worker, and remain deeply committed to professional public social services (including probation), in my academic work to date I have dwelt on how professional practice might change in the light of research about how and why people stop offending.

That said, because such 'desistance' research has placed a premium on listening carefully to ex-offenders' experiences, both as ex-offenders and (more recently) as service users, it is beginning to connect with broader debates about user voice and public sector reform - and with the vexed questions about the relationship between a genuine citizen-led local democracy on the one hand, and crude, market-based consumerism on the other.

Leaving that debate aside, in the context of the rhetoric of the 'big society', and, perhaps more to the point, in the new age of austerity, it seems obvious that it is necessary to look beyond the role of professionals in rehabilitation and reintegration. Even if professional practices and processes were rebuilt around desistance research, professionals can't deliver reintegration

for ex-offenders by themselves.

They may have the key role in the development of individual capacity for change; they may lead in working towards the formal completion of judicially imposed sanctions and through this towards the individual's rehabilitation as an equal citizen. However, as in just about any other change process that any of us navigate, it is our informal support systems and networks (our families, our friends, our communities of interest) that hold the key to successful change.

## Informal networks

It is in these networks that we are most susceptible to influence (for better and worse), most open to support (and vulnerable to the lack of it), most willing to learn from others' experiences (or suffer from repeating their mistakes). All of which begs the question, how can local authorities and their staff work in and with these informal networks, for both principled and fiscal reasons?

Some recent work in Northern Ireland has acquainted me a little with the difficulties that former political (or 'paramilitary') prisoners faced in their

release and reintegration, and with how they have managed these processes individually and collectively. Precisely because of their insistence on their political status, these ex-prisoners refused probation help, instead forming their own associations and peer support networks. They saw, and continue to see, reintegration not as process of personal reform, but as a collective struggle for equality and full citizenship. In one sense, this is unusual example born of an unusual context, but I think there is much to learn from it for ex-offender reintegration.

A more familiar example of collective action and mutual accountability for processes of recovery and reintegration is apparent in the work of Alcoholics Anonymous and other recovery networks. Although similar recovery and/or user voice movements have developed slowly in the criminal justice sphere, around the country local initiatives have begun to appear, combining elements of peer support with renewed engagement with other elements of civil society.

Here in Scotland, for example, a new 'Faith in Throughcare' initiative has developed, in which community development workers support volunteers (many of them ex-offenders) and faith communities to engage with and support vulnerable released prisoners. It represents a clear effort to build and to use social capital in the resettlement process. The challenge for local authority managers and practitioners is surely to work out how best to engage with, mobilise and support these kinds of initiatives - plugging their resources and strengths

into professional expertise, community planning and wider partnerships, so as to develop the synergies that might produce the best return on limited resources.

That said, it is perhaps a truism that collective efficacy and social capital are weakest where they are needed most; that is, in the communities that bear the brunt of the structural problems that the economy faces. To now look to these communities to support themselves and one another, just when the public sector is likely to be most squeezed, is not only practically problematic, it verges on being morally and politically offensive - if not a new kind of (economic) victim-blaming, then a new kind of holding (economic) victims responsible for mitigating the effects of an economic crisis not of their making. Perhaps not the ideal working environment to facilitate user led next practice, or is it?

### The reintegration agenda

No doubt, you can sense my ambivalence. On the one hand, economic constraints on the state's tendency to binge on punishment (witness the recent announcements about de-commissioning prisons) are something most criminologists will welcome, given the high economic, social and cultural costs and very poor return on investment that excessive use of imprisonment represents. I also see real potential in the diminution of the state's capacity to 'own' the reintegration agenda. On the other hand, making the rehabilitation revolution work requires resources, both fiscal and attitudinal - not necessarily resources for the expansion of formal

agencies like probation, but certainly resources for the expansion of capacity in communities and in civil society to make reintegration function effectively. Building reintegrative, desistance-supporting communities won't be easy.

### **Temptation**

Frankly, in the structural and political context that we now face, it is more likely that consumerism will, as the distinguished sociologist Zygmunt Bauman once put it, set us 'at one another's throats'. But if local authorities can resist the temptation to which many succumbed in the 1980s, and can keep community development alive, what potential might exist to mobilise ex-offenders themselves and engage them in the business of supporting their own and one another's reintegration?

Certainly their opportunities for paid work will diminish, but many might need, want and seek meaningful work in other contexts. I wonder what could be achieved by recognising, building and steering the strengths and capacities of this excluded population – strengths that could be directed towards their own integration and the constitution of stronger communities. Harnessing this potential could enable local communities to be better placed to survive the long winter ahead.

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# What is 'big society'?



by Richard Kemp

"Ah", I can hear readers think. "Typical Liberal Democrat and now desperately trying to reconcile the irreconcilable inside the coalition government."

Not quite - well actually not at all! 'Big society' is part of the new localism agenda and that agenda says, "let a thousand flowers bloom", so I don't need to know precisely what 'big society' is before deciding to adopt and adapt it to a fundamental approach of my party - community politics.

The most important point about 'big society' is that a Tory prime minister is backing it. Remember - the last Tory PM but one famously told us that there is no such thing as society. So the big picture looks good - but the small picture looks ill-informed. Who dreamed up the barking mad idea to create an army of 5,000 people to stimulate volunteers? These people will be self financing and do ... Well no-one knows what.

Has no-one behind this thought realised that there are already up to 500,000 employees in the public sector who are engaging communities and encourage volunteering in so many ways? So 5,000 more, based nowhere and with no contacts are likely to achieve little.

In September, for the Lib Dem party conference, Local Government Leadership published a booklet on community politics which is our response to 'big society'. Similar documents were written by Cllr Steve Reed (Lambeth) and Cllr Colin Barrow (Westminster) at their conferences. Together we gave evidence to the Commons' Communities and Local Government Department select committee on 1 November.

It is clear from reading the documents that the real split on localism does not come along political lines. The political traditions describe localism differently but mean the same things. The real difference is between those in every party who want to devolve, empower and involve and those who don't. For my taste there are too few in the first category and too many in the latter.

This is already a volunteering nation with at least 3.5 million people volunteering regularly and many more acting as carers or just good neighbours. We must never confuse activism and volunteering with 'committeitis'. Far more people are prepared to raise funds and run school trips for the PTA than are prepared to stand for school governing bodies.

## What is 'big society'?

Most people want to be involved in taking about or helping something if they can put the word 'my' into the description: my street; my kid's school; my shopping centre; my library. It all means something to people at a scale they can understand and at a level in which they can see their involvement producing something.

A city like Liverpool works at five different levels; conurbation; city; district; ward; and neighbourhood. If we understand this we can work out how to involve people appropriately at the neighbourhood level yet harness their thoughts and aspirations at that local level into a wider understanding of the big things that our towns and cities need to plan for.

Cities need to have a big picture approach to the future of their area and the delivery of services. In planning terms they need to have a macro policy which looks at the potential of an area then pulls together the land, financial and educational resources to deliver that policy. That policy, however, cannot be delivered in one bloc. Cities are composed of neighbourhoods, each of which needs to conduct its own analysis to see how it will assist the macro activity of the council. The big picture is informed by the neighbourhoods - the neighbourhoods are informed by the big picture.

It is not only in planning that we can see similar opportunities. Every area has its different needs and city-wide delivery contracts and programmes have to recognise that difference if we are to give people what they want in a cost-effective

way. There is a myth that big contracts are the cheapest form of delivery. For some things that is true, but in many ways smaller contracts delivered with the grain of a community's desires and by social enterprises can be more cost effective by delivering real local priorities and adding real value through enhanced outputs in the contract agreements.

The government recognised the truth of the economic power of localism when it accepted the 16 place-based pilots delivered by almost 30 councils for families with complex needs. Here the local council with its local mandate is being given the authority to pull together all the funding streams which have been poured into such families. Solutions to those families' needs will be decided with them and not for them. Each of these families costs up to £300,000 a year and now we will shape decisions locally, blend budgets locally, decide outcomes locally and produce projects locally. The financial savings will be massive; the human saving uncountable.

In their partnerships all the partners can get together around the potential of localism. So let's all adopt the well known Scouse method of management. Don't wait for a report on localism and 'big society'; don't wait for guidance. Just get on and BLOODY WELL DO IT!

*Councillor Richard Kemp is chair of the Local Government Association Liberal Democrat group and councillor for Liverpool city council*



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