



POLICY BRIEFING

ESSENTIAL FACTS ABOUT THE BIG SOCIETY

1. What's the Big Idea?

The Big Society is David Cameron's 'big idea' to fundamentally change the relationship between citizens, the voluntary and community sector and the state. It involves the radical transformation of public services – giving local people and not-for-profit organisations the opportunity to take over the running of public services – and giving more control to citizens over what happens in their area. The government wants to see more people involved in local community action and has said its aim is to have neighbourhood groups in every community, and for every adult to be involved in a neighbourhood group. It's also about devolving power from central government to local government and giving local authorities more control over decision-making in their areas.

2. Is this new, or just the same old stuff?

Big Society could be described as '*something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue*'. It's got similarities with the previous government's devolution and empowerment agenda ('old'), but it seems to go much further in the scale of its ambition ('new'). It borrows a lot from approaches overseas, such as the free schools model from Sweden, and community organising from the United States. Some have said it's true to a Conservative tradition ('blue') that goes back to Disraeli's 'one nation' politics, but it's a long way from Margaret Thatcher's statement that there is 'no such thing as society'.

3. I've heard that Big Society is just a cover for spending cuts. Is that true?

Some people have suggested that, whilst others say it's not related to the cuts. The fact is, we can't prove it either way as we're getting them both at the same time. But over time, as the economy recovers and we get the public finances under control, we'll see whether the changes that Big Society offers have been realised and whether power has truly been devolved to local people, whether citizens are able to hold the state to account and whether we become a more socially active and responsible society.

4. What's this neighbourhood army? Are we sending troops to another war?

No, this is a social action army. The government wants to see community groups being set up everywhere, supported by 'community organisers'. They will train 5,000 of these community organisers to help citizens' organise themselves and make their communities better places to live, work and play. The government's idea of community organising comes from Saul Alinsky's work in the US including his book 'Rules for Radicals' and has been successfully used by groups in the UK for some years. Probably the most famous community organiser is President Barack Obama, who was a community organiser in Chicago before going into politics.

5. What has John Lewis got to do with public services?

During the election, David Cameron talked about John Lewis (yes the department store!) which is an employee-owned business, as an example of how public services might be

run in the future under the Big Society. The government wants to create opportunities for frontline workers to set up cooperatives to run public services, charities and social enterprises. A new 'right to bid' will allow local people to bid to take over the running of any local public service that they feel could be run better under community control.

6. So we're all going to take over public services then?

Well, we'll have the opportunity, but according to recent polls it appears as if the general public has a fairly limited appetite for actually being responsible for running public services. However, lots of people say they do want to have a say over how services are run and to hold government to account for the way they are run. The Education Secretary, Michael Gove, said there had been 700 expressions of interest from people keen to set up new 'free schools', but it turns out only 62 applications have been submitted and even fewer people are queuing up to volunteer to empty rubbish bins!

7. What's the Big Society Bank idea about?

The government is going to use money that is sitting dormant in banks (money no one has claimed to own for a number of years) to support the Big Society programme. The previous government introduced the legislation to do this and was planning a 'Social Investment Wholesale Bank' to provide investment to social enterprises and charities to develop the social businesses. The Big Society Bank will do a similar thing, though it may support a wider range of activity than just loans for community enterprise. The bank is planned to open for business in April 2011, with assets of between £60m-£100m to start with.

8. Is there any other money available to pay for all this stuff?

As everyone knows, money's tight and 'more for less' is the mantra of the moment. But there is some public funding for certain aspects of the Big Society programme – there's the Big Society Bank, small grants for neighbourhood groups in deprived areas (called 'Communities First') and funding to train 5,000 community organisers. But the government does want to see a significant increase in voluntary action which will not be paid for directly by government. And they also want to see what public money there is directed to where people want to see it go – so charities, social enterprises and cooperatives that want to take over public services will have the opportunity to do so and to receive the contract funding that accompanies this.

9. What is the Big Society Network?

The Big Society Network was set up before the election, at the same time as the Conservatives published their original Big Society policy paper. It is a group of citizens and groups that want to achieve the Big Society's aim of having lots more social action going on. It is independent of government, but has very close links. One of the Network's co-founders, Nat Wei (now Lord Wei), has been appointed by David Cameron to advise the government on Big Society.

10. I heard Big Society means I'll have to do the jobs that public sector employees used to do. Is that true?

Well...no one is being forced to do anything at the moment. However, there is likely to be less public sector staff to do some things and, if local people want these things to continue, then they will have to find an alternative way to keep them going. That may be finding a charity or social enterprise to take something over, or by doing it themselves. Libraries are being given as an example of where volunteers could be used to help keep them open.

11. It's all a bit vague isn't it?

It's true that there's not a massive amount of detail on precisely what the Big Society entails - it's more of a framework or a 'vision' of how things could be in the future. The government expects voluntary and community groups, charities, social enterprises and citizens to 'fill in some of the detail' and shape it in their own ways. Maybe that makes it appear a bit vague, but it also gives some opportunities for influencing what happens – if we respond quickly as things are moving at a fair old lick. What we're not being given is a complete policy with everything worked out and planned – this is no *fait accompli* – which feels quite different from the way some policy was developed under the last government.

12. Where can I find out more?

Urban Forum has lots of information on its website about the Big Society, including a [briefing presentation](#), a [policy response](#) and [Big Society blogs](#)

You can also find information on the [Cabinet Office website](#) and the [Big Society Network's website](#).

There are also a number of interesting papers and articles about Big Society that other people have written...here are a few:

- new economics foundation: [Ten Big Questions about the Big Society and ten ways to make the best of it](#)
- New Start Editorial Director and co-organiser of Big Society in the North group, Julian Dobson's, blog - [Living with Rats](#)
- [The Big Society: How it Could Work](#), by Gabriel Chanan and Colin Miller
- Social media commentator, David Wilcox's, [Social Reporter blog](#)

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August 2010