



Briefing on The 'Big Society'

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The 'Big Society'

1. Introduction

1.1 The 'Big Society' is a Government agenda that seeks to shift power from politicians to people.

1.2 This briefing provides:

- A short background on the 'Big Society'
- A summary of the key elements of the 'Big Society' agenda
- A short discussion of some of the themes emerging in this debate.

1.3 NCVO will be contributing to the debate on the 'Big Society' and the development and implementation of detailed policy proposals in relation to it. We need to ensure that the views of our members are taken into account, so please email your views to Elizabeth.Chamberlain@ncvo-vol.org.uk so that they can inform our policy work in this area.

2. Background

2.1 The Conservatives set out their initial ideas with respect to the VCS in June 2008 in their Green Paper 'A Stronger Society: Voluntary Action for the 21st Century' (http://www.conservatives.com/news/news_stories/2008/06/voluntary_action_in_the_21st_century.aspx). In autumn 2009 David Cameron set out his vision for the 'Big Society' in the annual Hugo Young lecture. This made clear the role that voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) would play in helping to achieve this vision.

2.2 The 'Big Society' was a key element of the Conservative Party's 2010 election campaign. David Cameron gave a second major speech at the Hugo Young Lecture (http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/11/David_Cameron_The_Big_Society.aspx), and it formed part of the manifesto. Significantly, it was the subject of the first major policy announcement of the new coalition government, on 18 May 2010, attended by both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, including the publication of a short outline of its 'Big Society' agenda (<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/407789/building-big-society.pdf>).

3. Summary of the 'Big Society' agenda

3.1 The published 'Big Society' agenda is relatively brief. The proposals will be developed in the coming weeks and months. However we already know that the agenda will cut across a number of government departments and policy programmes.

3.2 The main themes that underpin the 'Big Society' are:

- Devolving power to communities and local government, including:
 - financial autonomy to local government;
 - a general 'power of competence' for councils;
 - a 'community right to buy' scheme and a 'right to bid' for communities to take over local facilities.
- A greater role in public services for VCOs and other civil society organisations:
 - for example by giving public sector workers a right to form employee-owned co-operatives and bid to take over the services they deliver.

- Supporting the voluntary and community sector, in particular by:
 - establishing an independent 'Big Society Bank', funded from unclaimed bank assets, which will provide social enterprises with the start-up funding and support they need to bid for government contracts or work towards delivering services under a payment by results model;
 - creating measures to encourage charitable giving and philanthropy;
 - supporting the creation and expansion of mutuals, co-operatives, charities and social enterprises;
 - encouraging people to take part in social action and volunteering, through the launch of a national 'Big Society Day' and the introduction of a National Citizen Service.

4. Discussion of emerging themes

4.1 The 'Big Society' gives welcome recognition to the role that VCOs play in the lives of individuals and communities. More importantly, it provides an opportunity for VCOs to help shape the priorities to strengthen local communities. It will be important that VCOs engage in the debate on the 'Big Society', setting out the contribution they already make, and what more they could do if given the right support and encouragement.

'Big society': good society or civil society?

4.2 There is a risk that the public debate may become confused with competing terms – 'big society', good society and civil society. Whilst there are differences of nuance it is important that we do not put too much focus on the various terms, rather than on the outcomes we all want to see.

4.3 Civil society is the space where people come together to pursue shared interests and to make a positive difference to their lives and the lives of others. There is consensus that a strong civil society is essential if we are to achieve positive social change. In 2009 NCVO published 'Civil Society: a framework for action' (<http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/about-vision-civil-society-framework-action>), which set out the key challenges we all need to address if we are to build the good society. In February 2010 our manifesto for the voluntary and community sector (http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sites/default/files/election_manifesto.pdf) set out what we believe is needed, from government and others, if we are to achieve the good society.

Devolving power

4.4 NCVO has long argued that decision-making should be devolved to the local level as much as possible and that there is a need to strengthen local democracy. Enabling greater participation through devolved decision making is an important step toward reducing the local democratic deficit, and truly engaging with people.

4.5 It is important however that local authorities work effectively and in partnership with the voluntary and community sector (VCS). Many VCOs have developed expertise in reaching out to marginalised and disadvantaged groups, and as such can strengthen the local decision making process by helping ensure local authorities can access a wider range of voices and have a better understanding of the needs and concerns of all individuals. VCOs also have an invaluable role in fostering citizen engagement by giving voice to a range of different interests and concerns, and ensuring people have the skills, confidence and support they need to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

4.6 As part of the 'Big Society' devolution plans, local councils will be given a 'general power of competence', so that they have the explicit authority to do what is necessary to improve their communities. Strengthening the powers of local authorities should enable them to better respond to local needs, acting decisively and effectively on behalf of their citizens.

4.7 However, building the 'Big Society' is not just about strengthening local authorities, it also requires strong communities. An important way to achieve this is to establish a new 'community right to buy' scheme, which will give local people the power to protect any community assets that are threatened with closure. This will include a 'right to bid' to run any community service instead of the state.

4.8 NCVO supports proposals to engage local people and communities by giving them a greater ability to determine the shape of the places in which they live. Communities should be given the opportunity to identify their concerns and priorities, and be given the opportunity to help design solutions. The proposed scheme has the potential of being one way of achieving this.

4.9 It will be important this devolution of power is properly managed: its success will largely depend on local authorities properly engaging individuals and communities, as well as local VCOs. This is also true in relation to the phasing out of local government ring-fenced funding, a proposal expected to be included in the 'Decentralisation and Localism Bill' announced in the Queen's Speech. The reduction of ring-fenced budgets can give communities a greater ability to determine local priorities, but it also means that local authorities and statutory partners will need to engage effectively with the full range of voices within their communities, to ensure that diverse and divergent needs are being met. By working together effectively in this way, local government and VCOs can make better use of resources and deliver real benefits to local people.

A greater say in public services

4.10 VCOs and other civil society organisations will be encouraged to take on a greater role in public service delivery, particularly through employee-led co-operatives.

4.11 NCVO welcomes this support for the sector's role in delivering public services. We believe public services are a public good: as such they require that individual choice, however important, must be balanced against the wider community interest. It is also essential that public services are commissioned and delivered in partnership with the people and communities they are intended for. Co-operatives and mutuals are one way of doing this, and there should be support for those who want to develop mutual or co-operative provision of public services.

4.12 However, public service delivery is only one of a number of roles that the sector plays. To bring a lasting transformation in public services and build the 'Big Society', VCOs must also be able to carry out their full range of roles, including identifying needs, designing solutions and giving service users the information, advice and support they need to make informed choices.

4.13 The increased role of the VCS in public service delivery must also be considered in light of the announced cuts to public spending. Those organisations that want to deliver services should be enabled and supported to do so through Compact compliant funding practices and financially sustainable arrangements, whether grants or contracts. When developing spending plans government – nationally and locally – must understand the vital contribution services run by voluntary and community organisations make, and their critical importance to the well-being of communities across the UK.

Supporting the voluntary and community sector

4.13 The Coalition Government recognises that VCOs have an important role to play in building the Big Society, and expresses its commitment to supporting and strengthening the VCS. This will be achieved both through financial support and fostering citizen engagement.

4.14 NCVO believes that a strong and independent voluntary and community sector is essential to a good society. Voluntary and community organisations need access to secure and fair funding if they are to play their full part in our communities, including service delivery. A well capitalised, independent and wholesale Social Investment Bank was identified as a key priority to achieve our vision of the good society. A robust, independent, and fully capitalised social investment wholesale bank would give VCOs and other civil society organisations access to a wider range of funding and financial options. This would increase access to investment for VCOs and other organisations that have a social or environmental purpose. Social investment can help to build the financial resilience of VCOs, providing new forms of finance to help meet their day to day needs and facilitate sustainable growth.

4.15 Achieving a broad culture of social action is the other key feature of the 'Big Society'. We believe volunteers are the lifeblood of our sector: they should be supported and their contribution to society should be actively celebrated, such as through the introduction of a 'Big Society Day'. People across society should be encouraged to actively engage in the causes and organisations they believe in. However, we strongly believe that the voluntary principle is the defining essence of our sector and should not be put aside in any plan to promote engagement.

4.16 It is also necessary that in relation to all aspects Government works closely with local and national infrastructure organisations, whose many functions of support to, and links with VCOs will be essential to achieve the aims of the 'Big Society' agenda. Any new programme, such as the National Citizens' Service, should involve and support existing structures and organisations within the VCS, building on their long standing skills and expertise, rather than bypassing or duplicating the achievements already made.

5. Next steps

5.1 The 'Big Society' agenda takes includes a number of the priorities we had identified as key asks in our Good Society Manifesto. There are also parallels with many of the emerging themes, and those contained in our vision. However at this early stage in the process it is not always clear how these proposals will develop, and how they will fit with other policy objectives and priorities.

5.2 Over the coming months, NCVO will seek to help develop the 'Big Society' agenda. In order to shape the debate as a voice for the sector, it is important for us to know what you think the Big Society will mean for the VCS and for your organisation. If you have any comments or would like to share your views, please email Elizabeth.Chamberlaini@ncvo-vol.org.uk, or join the online discussion at <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/networking-discussions/discussions/bigger-picture/-state-sector-8>.

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