



CVS Rochdale **Policy Briefing**

The Big Society

Introduction

The **Big Society** is the flagship policy idea of the 2010 Conservative Party general election manifesto and forms part of the legislative programme of the Conservative – Liberal Democrat Coalition Agreement.

The aim is to change the relationship between local citizens, the voluntary and community sector and the state. It involves the radical transformation of public services. Local communities will be given the opportunity to take over the running of public services and have more control over what happens in their local area. The government also want to see more people involved in volunteering and local community action through local neighbourhood groups. The following agreed policy changes are as follows:-

1. Give Communities More Power

- Radical reform of the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which they live
- Introduction of new powers to help communities save local facilities and services threatened with closure, and give communities the right to bid to take over local state run services
- Training a new generation of community organisers and support the creation of neighbourhood groups across the UK, especially in the most deprived areas.

2. Encourage people to take an active role in their communities

- Introduction of a range of measures to encourage volunteering and involvement in social action, including launching a national "Big Society Day" and make regular involvement a key element of civil service and staff appraisals.
- Introduce a range of measures to encourage charitable giving and philanthropy
- Introduction of a National Citizens Service – this flagship project will provide a programme for 16 year olds to give them a chance to develop- the skills need to be active and responsible citizens, mix with people from different backgrounds, and start getting involved in their communities

3. Transfer power from central to local government

- Devolution of power and greater financial autonomy to local government, including a full review of local government finance
- Giving councils a general power of competence
- Abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies and return decision making power on housing and planning to local councils.

4. Support co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises

- Support the creation and expansion of mutuals, co-operatives, charities and social enterprises, supporting them to have greater involvement in the running of public services
- Give public sector workers a new right to form employee-owned co-operatives and bid to take over the services they deliver.
- Establish a Big Society Bank to provide finance for not for profit organisations and non governmental bodies

5. Publish government data

- New right to data so that government held datasets can be requested and used by the public
- Oblige the police to publish detailed local crime data statistics monthly

The Big Society Bank

The Big Society Bank will ensure that all the money from dormant bank accounts made available to England is put to good use for the benefit of society. By expanding the social investment market place and helping to attract extra private sector investment it is expected that over time the Bank will generate hundreds of millions of pounds for charities, social enterprises and voluntary groups to fund social projects across the country, creating opportunities for social action and community involvement. As a wholesale organisation, the Bank will invest in financial intermediaries in the social investment market, who in turn will increase access to finance for frontline, social organisations. The funds from the dormant bank accounts will enable the Government to start stimulating activity where there is none and also help existing charities, social enterprises and community organisation to make changes in their local areas. The Bank is expected to start with £60 – 100m funds. The Government has suggested that Big Society Bank may not itself be a bank and that it may be wound up once its role of accelerating social lending has been achieved. The first funds from the bank has been set to start in April 2011 – At this present time no guidelines have been available as to how organisations, social enterprises etc will be able to apply for the funding.

Conclusion

The Big Society gives welcome recognition to the role that voluntary and community sector organisations play in the lives of individuals and communities; and provides a real opportunity for our sector to shape the priorities and strengthen local communities.

The increased sectors role in the delivering of public services is also welcomed, however it is essential that public services are commissioned and delivered in partnership with the communities they are intended for.

The increased role of the sector in public service delivery must also be considered in light of the announced public spending cuts. On Wednesday the 15th September in response to a question in the Commons from Julie Hilling, Labour MP for Bolton West about what the Prime Minister would do to save groups such as Bolton Community and Voluntary Services, which has lost £89,000 of grants this year. He replied: "We should say to every single council in the country: 'When it comes to looking at and trimming your budgets, don't do the easy thing, which is to cut money to the voluntary bodies and organisations working in our communities. Look at your core costs. Look at how you can do more for less. Look at the value for money you get from working with the voluntary sector.' This response is echoed by the National Centre for Voluntary Organisations who state that voluntary and community sector organisations "that want to deliver services should be enabled and supported through Compact compliant funding practices and financially sustainable arrangements, whether grants or contracts"

The Coalition government recognises that our sector has an important role to play in building the Big Society, and expresses its commitment to supporting and strengthening the sector through financial support and fostering citizen engagement. However, in order to bring a lasting transformation voluntary and community sector organisations also need to 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 needs to make informed choices.

It is also important that voluntary and community sector organisations 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.

Over these next month's more information regarding The Big Society will be available and here at CVS Rochdale we will keep organisations informed of changes which will affect the communities in the Borough.

