

WHAT IS BIG SOCIETY?



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Foreword

Big Society is a key guiding philosophy of the National Association of Local Councils.

Much has been written and said about the Big Society, but ironically the more people hear about it, the less they appear to understand the concept. So I want to introduce the following collection of essays from parliamentarians and people from across the political spectrum by briefly putting forward our articulation of what the Big Society means for the 9,000 very local (community, neighbourhood, parish, town and village) councils in England.

While the Big Society is a challenging concept – and one which the Prime Minister has described as being his passion and “mission in politics” – it is not in fact a new philosophy for our local councils.

Local councils are made up of around 80,000 locally elected representatives who have decided to give up some of their time to work together for the common good of the area they live in. They have helped pioneer

‘big society’ for a long time: since 1894 to be precise.

Local councils do as much or as little as their communities want. They bring local people – as well as other organisations, groups and businesses – together to improve their local area. Fuelled by what their people and communities want, local councils take social action which makes a real difference. Our local councils don’t endure the notion of a broken Britain – they and their communities are actively doing something about it if they can. And they usually can.

With the support or the demands of their communities, local councils (but not exclusively so) are well positioned to gauge local needs and find solutions. They can achieve outcomes for their respective very local societies in ways that are personal, unique, bespoke, diverse and yet effective.

Be it helping to run the local library, working with

local schools, saving the Post Office, providing sports and recreation facilities, organising community galas, shows and events alongside being the voice of the community, working with and often funding local voluntary groups, local councils are already the embodiment of Big Society and localism in action.

Very local councils have been around for over 100 years. They set a local council tax (a precept) for the residents who live in their area. The residents who live there know how much they pay to their local council and to other tiers of local government, be it a unitary authority, district/borough council and/or county council.

A person who lives in London may over the coming months or years start investing in their immediate community through a newly created local council, as well as to their London Borough Council. In the main, residents in areas represented and supported by local councils don't shudder, scoff or complain at the amount of money they invest in the community via the local council. The communities they represent contribute financially and socially but gain in the same ways.

This is why we support efforts by the previous and current Government to shift power to a more local level. Empowered local people coming together to take more responsibility for their community through local councils is a tried and tested and trusted model of

grassroots action.

So whether the collective efforts of our local councils are labelled as Big Society, good society, our society or local society – our local councils always have been doing it and will almost certainly be doing even more of it in the future.

Cllr Michael Chater
Chairman, NALC



A New Era for Parish Councils

I see every prospect of parish councils continuing to grow in importance and prominence in the years to come.

Parish councils are living proof that small is beautiful. Civil parishes have their roots in forms of grass-roots governance that go back centuries. The practice of neighbours coming together to decide, collectively, how to administer local services and improve their hometown or village, has survived plague, civil war, and industrial revolution - and remains vital to the future of our democracy.

Parishes are traditionally responsible for very local, small-scale services. These might include mowing the town's lawns, planting gardens, looking after the clock, maintaining public toilets or bins. But in fact parishes can be the focus for a much bigger debate about a neighbourhood's identity, local people's aspirations, and their hopes for the future. It's natural for people to like that sense of being rooted in and connected to the place they love.

Perhaps that's why we continue to see interest in forming new parishes; not just in rural areas, but urban areas too. Earlier this year, the residents of Queen's Park in Westminster

secured double the number of signatures needed to require the council to consider their case to be designated as a parish.

In fact, what parishes represent - communities making their own choices about their neighbourhood's future; influence being exercised at a very local level indeed - goes to the heart of the historic transfer of power, from central to local, from bureaucratic control to democratic deliberation, that this Government is seeking to achieve. That is why, as we look to the future, Government is committed to helping parishes, and other forms of neighbourhood democracy, thrive.

For starters, the Government is cutting red tape. We want to get rid of the antiquated rules that mean parish councils still have to settle their bills by means of double-signed cheques - in an age when a great number of organisations have already been using electronic transactions for a decade or more. For seconds, I came into office with the firm belief that Whitehall needs to do less telling, and more listening to local democratic

organisations. I have set up a “barrier-busting” service, whereby parish councils and community groups who want to get things done in their neighbourhood can access help and advice from senior civil servants on removing the obstacles in their way. In its first six months, the team handled more than 200 requests.

These steps, however, are only a start. The Localism Bill is currently being debated by Parliament. We hope that it will receive Royal Assent later in 2011. When it comes into force, its provisions will bring new powers and new opportunities for civil parishes.

First, the Bill will introduce what is called a “general power of competence.” Currently, councils can only do what national laws specifically say they can. In the future, we want them to be able to do whatever local people think fit - provided that this does not clash with other laws. This is a change in the default mode, passing the initiative to councils to act in innovative and different ways. We think that parish councils should be able to use this new power, provided that they meet certain conditions, and we are in discussions the National Association of Local Councils as to how exactly the power might apply to parishes. What eligible parishes choose to do with that power will be up to them. They might, for instance, decide to invest in community composting, or turn the village pub into a wi-fi hotspot - within the parameters of the law, the only limits will be their imagination and ingenuity.

Second, the Bill will introduce a “right to challenge.” Local people, parishes and community groups often have bright ideas of how best to organise very local services (such as, for example, a “community taxi” to help people who have trouble getting out and about.) In some cases, the council at the next level up, which holds the budget for such services, might be receptive to the idea, and commission the local group or parish. However, local groups’ ability to bid is dependent on the good will of the commissioning body - and those bodies

are not always ready to listen. With the right to challenge, the local group or parish will be able to put their ideas to the council, and, providing their proposals meet the right standard, trigger a tendering exercise so that they have the chance to compete to put their ideas into practice.

Third, and perhaps most radically of all, the Bill will introduce neighbourhood planning. Under neighbourhood planning, people will be able to come together and decide where they want new homes, shops and offices should go; what that new development should look like; and which green spaces they most want to protect. This is an unprecedented opportunity for very local communities to make the planning system work for them. If approved in a local referendum, the plans will have real legal force. This is not mere consultation, but genuine influence and control in the hands of local groups. Parishes are ideally placed to lead the local debate and, where they exist, will be the only groups who have the right to exercise the powers of neighbourhood planning. Dozens of parishes around the country are already exploring with local people how these powers might work in their local area. I have no doubt that many more will want to seize the chance to articulate and give force to local people’s ambitions.

We stand, then, on the threshold of a new era for parishes: an era which promises less red tape, more powers, new freedom to get on with the job. I see every prospect of parish councils continuing to grow in importance and prominence in the years to come, and matching a long and rich heritage with a bright and busy future.

Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP

Minister for Housing and Local Government



Local councils – Big results

Town and parish councils should not be neglected as avenues for engagement, being “not synonymous with community but very close to community”.

Earlier this year, the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, which I chair, delivered the report of its first major inquiry of this Parliament, on Localism.

Localism is supposed to be one of the key guiding principles of this Government. As our inquiry concluded, however, there is still much confusion—not least within Government itself—about what it actually means, and how it connects with that other key Government policy, the Big Society.

The terms ‘Big Society’, ‘localism’, and ‘decentralisation’ have been used in conjunction in a variety of contexts by many commentators, and are explicitly linked by the Government. The three core components of the Big Society agenda have been defined by the Government as:

- Empowering communities: giving local councils and neighbourhoods more power to take decisions and shape their area;
- Opening up public services: enabling charities, social

enterprises, private companies and employee-owned co-operatives to compete to offer people high quality services;

- Promoting social action: encouraging and enabling people from all walks of life to play a more active part in society, and promoting more volunteering and philanthropy.

When the Minister for Decentralisation, Greg Clark, appeared before the Committee, we asked him how localism, decentralisation and the Big Society relate to each other. He answered:

“They are related. I see localism as the ethos, if you like, to try to do everything at the most local level. I see decentralisation as the way you do that. If you start from a relatively centralised system, you decentralise to achieve that. [...] If you do that seriously and comprehensively then I think you move from a position of a very centralised state to something we have called the big society. Therefore, localism is the ethos; decentralisation is the process, and the outcome

is the Big Society.”

Not everyone is convinced that the Big Society and other elements of the decentralisation programme sit comfortably alongside each other, however. Reconciling a desire for greater service integration at local level with an approach expected to lead to a diverse pattern of service provision and community activity may be problematic. Could town and parish councils help to square that circle?

As the Committee heard during its inquiry, local councils are already making an enormous contribution to the existing ‘Big Society’. During a Committee visit to the south-west of England we were privileged to meet residents and members of the town council of Dulverton, in Somerset. In November 2010 The Big Society Network and NESTA launched nine pilots in the ‘Your Local Budget’ project, which is designed to give people a say in how mainstream local authority budgets are spent in their area through ‘participatory budgeting’ methods. Dulverton Town Council is running one of the pilot projects. Dulverton is a small market town where participatory budgeting has been trialled since 2009; the current project involves £16,000 worth of public spending. However, by employing ‘Total Place’ tools, the town council discovered three years ago that nine different public authorities spent a total of £10 million each year in Dulverton, and the council is keen to secure greater local control over how these resources are used: “Every place should be given the opportunity to do what it wants and show what it is able to do.” Grass-cutting contracts and the management of car parks are areas of particular interest to the town council, and it would also like an opportunity to run the town’s library, recycling centre and youth club. However, the entire parish budget is £120,000, so there is no prospect of simply being able to bid to take these assets over. 300 people had attended a public meeting in the week prior to the Committee’s visit, where they voted both to increase the precept by 25 pence per week, and for some actions that they wanted the community to take. Nearly 50

residents volunteered to take these plans forward, and four new ‘action groups’ were established.

Dulverton is far from alone in the forefront of greater community involvement in service provision. Staffordshire County Council told us about its Neighbourhood Highway Teams, which deal with small maintenance problems that affect the appearance and environment of local areas; the work programme is designed in discussion with community representatives, often parish councils. The Commission for Rural Communities cited an example of a town council which had taken on responsibility for some highways maintenance work from the principal authority, with local people doing the work: “they are very responsive and have that local knowledge about where the issues are likely to arise.” North Dorset District Council told us that in 2006–09 it implemented changes which achieved a 25% reduction on its net revenue budget. Town and parish councils and community partnerships were consulted about which services “were important to their communities and, if important, would they be prepared to work with the district council to safeguard their future provision”. The services under consideration included leisure centres, public conveniences, sports development, tourism promotion, open space maintenance, car parks and street cleansing.

So what do local councils bring that other representatives of the local community do not? During our inquiry we heard much about what the voluntary and community sector were contributing to the Big Society; there is no doubt that their role is crucial, too. But as another of the witnesses to our Localism inquiry argued, “democratic accountability is not a key strength of voluntarist approaches”. Along with closeness to the community, democratic accountability is a key strength of town and parish councils. Our report noted the view that town and parish councils should not be neglected as avenues for engagement, being “not synonymous with community but very close to community”. There, I suggest, is where town and

parish councils can find their role. Close to the community, but with a democratic mandate, they are ideally placed to defend, represent and advance their communities' interests in the Big Society however that might be defined.

The House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee's report on Localism can be found at www.parliament.uk/clg

Clive Betts MP

Clive Betts MP has represented his Sheffield (previously Sheffield Attercliffe, now Sheffield South East) seat since 1992. He was elected Chairman of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee in June 2010.



Issues of inequality

We are likely to see the development of different forms of local bodies – community committees and parish councils are gaining strength in many places and neighbourhood forums will develop.

In light of the recent riots and public disorder in parts of England the debate surrounding the Government's concept of the Big Society is now more relevant than ever.

Advocates of the Big Society seek more volunteering and philanthropy, less public funding and more diversity and pluralism in the delivery of services. They argue for a reduction in the statutory sector and the opening up of services, chiefly at local level, to more competition.

The Prime Minister has presented the Big Society as a radical break from the past and what he terms the statist action of Big Government. But many aspects of the Big Society build on an existing rich tradition in this country of community, localism, co-operation and improving local accountability. There is danger too in failing to acknowledge the important role local government has played in encouraging and enabling this tradition.

The differing views of the important roles of local government and the voluntary and community sector are key aspects of the Big Society debate. The two sides in the debate often become polarised, with one side arguing that the state is a burden on society while others argue that local government can enable and deliver positive action. All too often, the drive to reduce or bypass the role of local councils gives little

recognition to the active role they can and do play in creating partnerships with a range of agencies to drive up and maintain public sector delivery and performance.

The recent riots and public disorder in London, the West Midlands, Manchester and Salford have shown the important role that local councils can play during emergencies and in their aftermath. Ministers were away from their desks and many were out of the country when the riots and looting escalated and spread. Council leaders in London boroughs and in cities like Manchester and Salford stepped into the fray.

Council leaders, councillors and local MPs worked together to support those who had lost their homes or businesses in the riots. Councils co-ordinated riot cleanups and worked with local community leaders which brought volunteers and council staff together in a way to help to show the pride that people have in the communities in which they live.

Local partnerships will be key to much of the rebuilding work that needs to go ahead in the areas affected by the riots. It is time to restore and value the vital role partnerships between local government and community and voluntary leaders play at local level.

In government, Labour worked in partnership with the

voluntary sector and in many instances saw this as central to innovation and improving the delivery of services. Many in the voluntary and community sector welcome this development and suggest that this partnership could have gone even further.

Before the last election, Labour had begun to move away from the view that the state could or should provide a uniform delivery model. We were placing more emphasis on the role social enterprises, co-ops and mutuals could play in making services more locally responsive as well as promoting local government's role as an enabler in this process.

The biggest deficiency of the Big Society project is the total lack of engagement with issues of inequality. Communities, particularly disadvantaged ones, need support from government and they need this from the state at central and local levels. Different communities require different levels of resourcing and input if social enterprises, co-ops, mutuals and so on are really to offer employment opportunities and better services in the most disadvantaged communities. Understanding this will be one of the more important policy discussions which will take place in the coming months.

However the Big Society idea as currently conceptualised by the Government cannot not deal with the complex social problems that are experienced in our most disadvantaged areas, such as housing estates which might have problems associated with entrenched unemployment and alienation. Nor can current conceptualisation offer solutions to the gang culture which is highlighted as playing a role in some of the recent riots

We now need to recognise that local government, working in partnership with others, can play a transformative role in changing communities for the better. Community and voluntary organisations and empowered residents are essential to revitalising communities but so is strong and effective local government.

The general power of competence for councils being brought in via the Localism Bill was welcomed by all political parties. We are likely to see the development of different forms

of local bodies – community committees and parish councils are gaining strength in many places and neighbourhood forums will develop.

Labour welcomes the development of community bodies that are representative and accountable. During the passage of the Localism Bill through the Commons we argued for neighbourhood forums to be larger and to be more accountable – we believed that they should also involve an elected local councillor. The Government did not accept amendments to achieve this, but we will continue to argue that neighbourhood forums need to be both representative and accountable. As the Localism Bill stands the new Forums are neither.

Localism will not flourish if it seeks to bypass councils, be they city or borough councils or town and parish councils.

Roberta Blackman-Woods MP - Shadow Minister for Civil Society

Roberta Blackman-Woods has represented the City of Durham constituency since 2005. She was appointed to the position of Shadow Minister for Civil Society in October 2010.

Barbara Keeley MP – Shadow Minister for Communities and Local Government

Barbara Keeley has represented her constituency in Worsley ((previously Worsley, now Worsley and Eccles South) since 2005. She was appointed to the position of Shadow Minister for Communities and Local Government in October 2010.



Concepts of the Big Society

Potentially a large network already exists to boost the Big Society revolution further: parish councils.

Around this time last year, I wrote an article for NALC on localism, stating that this “could be one of those rare moments in political history where policy idea meets the sweet spot of political opportunity”.

Genuine progress is being made on this. The Localism Bill is fast approaching Royal Assent and the Government has already introduced the Open Public Services White Paper into Parliament and a Local Government Finance Bill is expected shortly. Furthermore, the Academies Bill could in time completely transform the education system.

The Big Society agenda fits neatly within these legislative changes. The idea behind it is to devolve power and decision making to communities and local people and to change assumptions about the ways in which public services are delivered. It can be achieved through community, mutuality, volunteering and philanthropy.

This is why proposals in the Localism Bill to allow communities the ‘Right to Challenge’ and the ‘Right to Buy’ are so important. Similarly significant is the introduction of free schools in the Academies Bill.

The Right to Challenge will allow for voluntary and community groups, social enterprises, parish councils and employees of local authorities to face up to local authorities and express an interest in delivering public services. Such a system will invariably challenge vested interests, ensure value for money and drive up standards.

The introduction of ‘free schools’ allows parent and community groups to set up their own schools, and challenge the local authority status quo.

These have proved extremely popular, with over 600 bids made in the first two bidding rounds, with applicants from football clubs, to businesses to voluntary groups. Around a

dozen are expected to open this year.

Whilst the Right to Buy will require local authorities to keep lists of community assets, which should then be offered to the community, should they come up for disposal. This will help communities to preserve sites and buildings which are of importance to the local area.

The £400m Big Society Bank, funded from a mix of dormant bank accounts and private sector investment, plays a key role. It will be able to co-invest in projects and underwrite investments in community schemes.

The Open Public Services White Paper builds on these steps, proposing “wherever possible, we will increase choice by giving people direct control over the services they use”. This is very much a starting point, but the implication is clear: Whitehall does not always know best.

However, much is going on already.

Central government is utilising personalised budgets to put money directly into the hands of users, for example those in long term care. It’s likely that these budgets will be extended to those with special educational needs, for housing and into other aspects of healthcare.

Community budgets have also been introduced – allowing a variety of groups to pool their budgets into one pot – leading to a more effective, efficient, streamlined and focussed approach to the issue.

Not only that, but it has already been shown in the pilots (focussed on vulnerable families) that community budgets can

significantly improve social outcomes.

Introducing co-operatives and mutuals into the public sector can also make a big difference to people’s lives. By giving workers a stake in their work, this can lead to improved happiness levels and in turn, greater productivity. I recently visited a co-operative store in Halesowen, and it is clear that this is a model of company governance which should be encouraged and expanded.

But it is local authorities which have been leading the way over the years.

In 2008, Barnet Council set up a process known as ‘Future Shape’, in which, according to Lynne Hillan, former council leader, they are “developing a new relationship with citizens. This is a relationship where we are clearer about what the deal is – what we will do, and what we will expect citizens to do”.

This has involved developing new policies in areas such as housing, youth services and family intervention, and through funding a £200,000 per year ‘Big Society Innovation Bank’. Furthermore, they are working with MySociety on a pioneering initiative called ‘Pledgebank’. It works by allowing users to set up pledges such as removing graffiti, and they can then agree to follow the proposal through if enough people pledge their support to the idea.

However, Barnet are not alone. Essex Council has been working towards becoming a procurement hub for the community. Essentially this means having oversight of service provision, but outsourcing the vast majority to the

private sector, in their case IBM. Whilst Lambeth have led the way by seeking to deliver many of their services through mutuals or cooperatives. These are not for profit, and include services such as schools, children's centres and environmental projects.

Councils in the West Midlands are also embracing the Big Society agenda. Dudley for instance has set up a Big Society unit. One project of theirs is currently looking into 'community rights' – essentially how they can empower marginalised communities to take over the running of local amenities and services.

Whilst in the Erdington district of Birmingham, Aquarius was set up as a response to concerns mounted by public sector workers. Budgets and resources were pooled with a number of local organisations to target substance abusers. They used a personalised approach with users and succeeded in substantially cutting the numbers of those committing crimes whilst under the influence.

Potentially a large network already exists to boost the Big Society revolution further: parish councils. With numbers totalling over 8,000 nationwide, they have undoubted potential to make a difference. Not only are they democratically accountable, but they have tax raising powers and do already offer services on a very localised level – including parks, street lighting and allotments.

The General Power of Competence, introduced in the Localism Bill, allows them to go much further. This will allow

parish councils, to do almost anything – unless it is specifically prohibited. The potential is obvious. Potential new powers and opportunities for them could include licensing rules, local speed limits, running leisure facilities and even more.

However, it is not enough to just empower citizens and communities. We need a culture change to go alongside these changes. This is why volunteering and philanthropy are key components to the future success of the Big Society.

A recent Cabinet Office Green Paper on Giving, contains a number of recommendations into developing philanthropy, and the Chancellor confirmed in the Budget that the Gift Aid process will be simplified, helping charities across the country.

Introducing the National Citizens Service, with pilots beginning this summer, will encourage and engage young people into giving their time for the local community. This is initially for 10,000 young people, but plans exist to increase numbers significantly after year one.

We should also look to engage adults more in volunteering, and we need more innovative approaches from the private sector to making this a reality. Nationwide, for instance, said that they will be giving every member of staff two days paid holiday a year to volunteer their time.

According to the 2010 World Giving Index, which measures the amount of time people donate, the UK featured in just 29th place. This indicates that we as a nation can do more.

Now is the time for citizens, councils and communities to step up to the challenge, grasp the nettle and deliver the

benefits which the Big Society can bring.

James Morris MP

James Morris was elected to Parliament in May 2010 to represent the seat of Halesowen and Rowley Regis. Prior to joining Parliament, he was the Director of the thinktank Localis.



Local Councils and the Big Society

In the Eden Valley of Cumbria (a “Big Society Vanguard”) the Big Society is not a treatise on political philosophy: it is a parish project.

The debate about the “Big Society” has drawn in grand theory, moral outrage and satire. Every commentator has added statistics, spoofs, and the grandest visions of human dignity. Critics think that the Big Society distracts us from the horror of cuts; supporters think that cuts distract us from the benefits of the Big Society.

But in the Eden Valley of Cumbria (a “Big Society Vanguard”) the Big Society is not a treatise on political philosophy: it is a parish project. We are the most sparsely populated district in the most sparsely populated constituency in England. We are at a record distance from schools and hospitals; we face

isolation and fuel poverty; and it is more and more difficult for people to live and support themselves in our countryside. Our priorities, therefore, include affordable housing (homes in villages are too expensive for young families, and as a result schools and businesses are closing); cheaper energy (we have a great potential resource of hydro-power in the Eden river and the Lakes); and broadband (which would allow the elderly to communicate with distant hospitals, children to work from home, and businesses to flourish in remote villages).

The people who feel these problems most pressingly are, of course, the communities themselves,

represented through parishes. And they have tried for years to respond with energy and ingenuity. Appleby had a plan to generate energy through a micro-hydro project on the Bongate weir, with a new design which was safe for the salmon. Kirkby Stephen proposed a new planning regime, allowing people to convert disused barns, and build housing on the edge of villages. From Morland to the Northern Fells parishes developed ways of delivering broadband – from beaming radio signals from church-towers, to digging and laying their own fibre-optic cable. But eighteen months ago, these schemes were not going anywhere. The Environment Agency (which controls the rivers) did not engage with community schemes for hydro-power; the district council disregarded the planning proposals as outside of their strategic plan; the telecoms companies and the government were not prepared to work with the parishes on broadband. Why? Because these large institutions – whether quangos, or civil service, or just big corporations – did not feel that communities should take on such responsibilities.

For decades large institutions have become increasingly professionalised and risk-averse. Almost every task now requires its own qualification. There are more and more specialists, who are in turn hemmed in by safety advisers, paper-work, procedures and lawyers. Each has a thousand reasons to say ‘no’. They believe that communities and parishes don’t know what they are

doing (because they don’t have the right qualifications); that they will be exposed to liability, insurance and legal claims (because they don’t have the right paperwork); that they lack the management skills and processes. In short: that they are amateurs: who can’t do projects, and shouldn’t be allowed to try. The Environment Agency, therefore, had other priorities than supporting community pilot schemes for hydro; the council planners viewed the community proposals on planning as ill-informed, inconsistent, and unstrategic; telecoms companies saw no commercial benefit in working alongside communities to serve isolated areas.

The “Big Society” changed this. Sometimes, it simply introduced a new culture of management – last October, rather than sitting in an office and saying ‘no’ to the application, the Environment Agency, went with DEFRA officials to Appleby and helped the community design a hydro scheme that met their regulations. Sometimes, it required an Act of Parliament. Nothing was going to convince district council planners that the Upper Eden community plan should replace the district plan. But the new Localism Bill has now allowed the Upper Eden parishes to write their own plan, and if they can win a community referendum, they can replace the official plan.

But, at its most ambitious, the Big Society brought not just changes in management and law, but also a

new attitude of mind. This July, Eden communities were finally able to present their detailed broadband requirements and proposals to the big telecoms companies. And for the first time BT, Fujitsu, Cable and Wireless responded. On the surface, this hardly appears revolutionary. After all, the project still involved some money (the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs providing some matching funding). And it was driven by parishes who have been undertaking community projects centuries before anyone mentioned the Big Society. It might thus seem a prime example of the criticism that Big Society brings nothing new. But such a project had in fact never happened before. And this was because although the funding and the community desire had been present, the culture and context were not.

The central players were still, of course, the communities. They got commitments from householders; offered to dig their own trenches; waive 'way-leave' charges across their land, and co-fund the project themselves. And as the local MP, I could help by setting up a broadband website and holding fifty meetings to coordinate the community bids and link them to the government. But the companies ultimately responded because, under the Big Society banner, came leadership and pressure from the very top. The Prime Minister made it clear he wanted companies to

work with communities, and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport changed the rules to allow sharing of broadband infrastructure. Extraordinary civil servants in Whitehall put hundreds of hours into ensuring that procurement structures and engineering systems suited parish models. And all of this together pushed and tempted and guided the companies to do what they had been so long reluctant to do: work in partnership with rural communities.

It is easy to say that communities know more, care more and can do more than our culture has acknowledged; and that they need to be liberated. It is easy to recognize how often parishes feel frustrated and stifled by rigid centralized programmes, and by a myriad of constraints and regulations. But new funding or new regulations alone will not allow communities to triumph. The Big Society will only work if in the end people believe in the Big Society – and that requires leadership, imagination and will, from the Prime Minister to the parishes themselves.

Rory Stewart MP

Rory Stewart MP was elected to Parliament in May 2010 to represent the seat of Penrith and the Border and is Chairman of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Local Democracy



Now's Your Chance

Decision making at the lowest possible level – as many decisions as possible being made with not for the local community.

For a very long time town and parish councils have been the forgotten heroes of local government. Caricatured as the 'Dibleyites' and derided by many councillors on principal authorities as the people who deal with bogs and burials it is now time to strike back!

All three major Parties now believe in localism. Well to be honest most of the people in those Parties have believed in it in theory for a long time. But year after year central governments of both Labour and Conservative Parties centralised remorselessly. Stalin would have been proud of the way that they withdrew decision making from councils and communities and enforced often irrelevant central government dictat by ring fencing money and imposing key performance indicators (up to 1,400 of them) which turned even big

councils into mere agents for central government.

Now the situation is vastly different and there are three Bills currently before Parliament which will massively alter the balance between central and local government:

- The Localism Bill which speaks for itself!
- The Police Reform Bill which improves the situation for local councillors and communities over vital licensing matters in addition to strengthening the role of elected members inside the system.
- The Health Bill which for the first time introduced local democratic leadership which will be accountable to local communities.

Alongside these Bills there is a recognition that

all three Parties believe that things need to be done at the lowest possible level involving as many people as possible. Tories call it 'Big Society'; Lib Dems call it 'community politics' and Labour calls it 'Cooperative councils'. In many ways it all means the same thing. Decision making at the lowest possible level – as many decisions as possible being made with not for the local community.

So who is at the lowest possible level? Who has the most day to day involvement with local people? Town and parish councils. The question for me is, "How many of you are up to taking advantages of the changes that the Government is allowing. My argument to Nick Clegg is that these Bills when they became Acts of Parliament will only enable localism to take place. It will only really change if we councillors at all levels accept the potentials of the Bills and doing something with them.

Let's take planning which should, in future be a key council function. In the past we have had to do things according to national rules laid down by planning guidance policies at regional and local levels and enforced by the Stasi-like Planning Inspectorate. Now it is communities that will be able to lay down what they want their neighbourhoods to feel and look like. That means new roles for councillors.

Firstly we will need to assist the community in drawing up neighbourhood plans. We will become a

facilitator in these matters.

Secondly, we will need to negotiate these community plans into the bigger policies of the upper tier or district councils.

Thirdly when applications come in that are perhaps outside the community plans we will have to become mediators. Seeking to bring together would be developers and communities.

This is far harder than just going down to the planning committee to moan about an application.

Have you ever really looked at the delivery of health services in your area? In future there are many ways in which you can contribute to policy making locally, service delivery locally and scrutiny of services locally. In addition Public Health as a whole is coming back to local government.

Have you ever been hacked off at your impotence in licensing matters? The Police Bill strengthens your hand? You will have more responsibility in future and there will be more political input into what were remote and secretive Police Authorities.

All three main Parties are now running major programmes to look at how councillors and communities can take advantage of these localist moves. I am running the Lib Dem programme which will be launched by the Deputy Prime Minister on 21st October. (Full details from ALDC at www.aldc.org)

All sorts of rights of challenges, scrutiny and acquisition are contained inside the three Bills but they are delightfully ill-defined! There is no guidance on Localism from the Government. That would simply be an oxymoron! Localism is what you want it to be.

I challenge all councillors but especially Town and Parish Councillors to take advantages of the opportunities that the Government is offering you. Work out what can be done at your level of government; work out what should be done at your level of government and then use your electoral mandate to pull services together in the way that the community think should be delivered and not the way some remote bureaucrat thinks they should be delivered.

Cllr Richard Kemp

Cllr Kemp is a Liberal Democrat Liverpool City Council councillor and leader of the Local Government Association Liberal Democrats



Trying to ensure the Big Society is a Fair Society

Councillors have a key role to play as facilitators of networks, making links within their communities, reaching out to marginalised groups and catalysing community action.

Few people would disagree with the objectives of the Big Society. Community empowerment, social action and social responsibility are self evidently good things. And if we accept the view that it is the outcomes of services that matter, rather than the means of delivering them, then opening public services to a wider range of providers is no bad thing either.

So, while we can all broadly agree about the ends of the Big Society being desirable, the key question is whether we have the right means in place to deliver these objectives. A further question of ask of this policy is whether the Big Society is likely to be a fair society. This question matters as the Coalition Government has placed fairness at the heart of its agenda for government

– you could say it made it its middle name when it chose to call its programme for government ‘Freedom, Fairness, Responsibility’.

The major challenge to the fairness of the Big Society is that we do not begin with a level playing field. Entrenched social and economic inequalities in the UK affect the ability of individuals and communities to engage in social action, volunteering and local democratic engagement. Stark inequalities currently exist in how the time, capacity and skills required to engage with the Big Society are currently distributed (Coote 2010, ippr and PwC 2010). If we do not factor these realities into the approach to growing the Big Society, we will surely fail (Schmuecker 2011).

This chapter first explores four causes for concern with regard to whether the Big Society will be a fair society. Many of these relate to concerns about voluntary and community sector organisations, as these are the vital intermediaries that will make the big society work. We conclude by considering what town and parish councillors can do to mitigate some of these causes for concern and grow the big society in their area.

Four causes for concern:

1) Community capacity is not evenly distributed: the Big Society seeks to shift responsibility from the public sector to individuals and communities, but not all communities are equally ready to take on this responsibility. And it is not always straightforward to ascertain which communities lack capacity. For example, it is generally true that economically deprived neighbourhoods have fewer resources to draw upon – whether financial or skills related – to sustain and build community capacity (Cox and Schmuecker 2010). Nonetheless, some economically deprived neighbourhoods do have active and vibrant voluntary organisations and strong and successful community leaders (ippr north 2010). Building community capacity is a resource-intensive and time-consuming activity that requires a long-term commitment.

2) Marginal voices may not get heard: the Big Society agenda – reinforced by the Open Public Services White

Paper – is highly focused on neighbourhoods, and geographically defined communities. For many people, this is a scale they can identify with. But those putting themselves forward to participate in decision-making will not necessarily be representative of the wider neighbourhood. There is a risk that minority interests will be marginalised, particularly those of groups that are already largely hidden, such as asylum-seekers and refugees. Big Society programmes must demonstrate a concern with liberty as well as community – there must be safeguards built in to avoid tyranny by the majority.

3) The importance of the public sector as a funder is not evenly distributed. Voluntary and community sector organisations in more economically deprived parts of England are more likely to be reliant on funding from the public sector for part of their income. As public sector budget cuts are implemented, these organisations are most at risk. Geographic inequalities may be exacerbated as a result.

Table 1 Proportion of VCS organisations in receipt of public funds, by region:

North East	43%
North West	42%
Yorkshire and Humber	39%
East Midlands	38%
West Midlands	38%
South West	37%

East of England	34%
London	33%
South East	33%

Source: Clifford et al 2010

Note: these figures are based on national survey evidence, and the confidence intervals are relatively wide. Nonetheless, the overall order of regions remains unchanged

4) Philanthropy is not evenly distributed. While encouraging greater philanthropy is a good thing, over-reliance on philanthropy to provide resources for social action will result in unfairness as some parts of the UK have deeper wells to tap. For example, in 2009/10, six people in the North East of England gave gifts of a million pounds or more, compared to 40 in London (Breeze 2010).

Furthermore, England's unbalanced economy means the capacity of the private sector to give also varies widely. A region like the North East of England with a relatively weak private sector base and a smaller number of large companies headquartered in the region has less capacity to boost corporate giving. These areas risk being doubly disadvantaged, given that those areas with a weaker private sector are also those where VCS organisations tend to be more reliant on public funding.

Growing the Big Society locally

Town and parish councils, along with their local

authority peers have a role to play in mitigating some of these risks to fairness, although they may not be able to overcome them entirely.

In particular, given their local knowledge and closeness to communities, councils are well placed to identify those organisations, groups and neighbourhoods that are most at risk. Councils and councillors should work in these areas to encourage organisations and individuals to take advantage of national capacity building programmes such as the Community First neighbourhood grants fund and Community Organisers programme.

But action need not be limited to maximising local benefit from national policies. At the local level councils can take action to build organisational strength to enable groups to be in receipt of asset transfer, providing them with greater financial sustainability. Furthermore, councillors have a key role to play as facilitators of networks, making links within their communities, reaching out to marginalised groups and catalysing community action. In this way they can not only contribute to building community capacity but help to ensure there is accountability to the whole community, not just those that shout the loudest.

In short, for the Big Society to be as fair as it can be, councils and councillors should do what most already seek to do: ensure their community is the best it can

be, with local civil society and local civic leaders working closely together for the greater good. Councils and councillors have a key role to play in enabling the big society to flourish locally.

This chapter is based on research supported by the North East Policy and Representation Partnership, which is funded by the BIG Lottery Fund.

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Parish Councils in The Big Society

But the real challenge and the real opportunity (in London) probably lies in devolving more power to borough councils and doing more to build engagement between residents, local councilors and councils.

Most people agree that local services and communities work best when the public get involved. And the public themselves continue to say that they don't feel able to influence local or national decisions – indeed the proportion of people who say they feel empowered to affect local decision has fallen in recent years.

It was against this background, that in 2007 the Brown government gave London's communities the right to form parish councils. Hitherto London had been the one place in England where there was no provision for parish governance. But while parishes play a vital role in many towns and villages across England, Londoners have not exactly embraced the opportunity that the 2008 reforms have given them.

True, a few Londoners are campaigning to create local parishes. Andrew Boff a conservative GLA member is leading a drive to establish a parish council for London Fields, and Geoff Juden is doing the same in Wapping. Fabian Sharp and others have probably come closest, with a campaign to turn the Queen's Park Neighbourhood Forum into a parish council – a campaign that has now secured over 1600 signatures, twice the number required to oblige the local council – Westminster – to conduct a governance review to give Queen's Park residents the option of creating a parish. But even if the referendum is held and is successful, it will be the first parish created in London.

Given the enormous size of the capital (7.5 million people), you could not say that the 2008 reforms are

having much of an impact.

Large cities are probably inherently less suited to parish level government than other areas. While London is often described as a city of villages, neighbourhoods do tend to run into one another and have a weaker sense of shared identity than do rural villages and smaller towns. At the same time, the capital has fairly high levels of residential churn, and social ties tend to revolve more around work and other interests, and less around place than they do elsewhere. All this weakens parish level identities and so militates against the creation of parish councils.

Finally, of course, London's 32 local borough councils probably answer some of the needs parishes answer elsewhere. Where district, let alone county councils, can feel quite remote institutions, most Londoners live only a short work or bus ride away from their town hall. Adding an extra-layer of government feels like adding one layer too many. All the more so as, from a Londoner's perspective, many of the issues affecting their quality of life, like transport and schools, are not in the remit of Parish councils.

That's not to say that parish councils definitely won't take off in London – if one or two start, others might follow. But the real challenge and the real opportunity probably lies in devolving more power to borough councils and doing more to build engagement between

residents, local councilors and councils.

Looking further into the future, some people, including Ken Livingstone, argue the case for a fundamental restructure of London governance, through the merging of the existing 22 boroughs into smaller number of larger 'strategic councils'. If this was to occur – and it seems a long long way off – then the future for London parish councils would look a lot rosier.

Ben Rogers

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www.centreforlondon.co.uk



The Big Society a year on: what have we learnt?

Town and parish councils can play a key role in bringing together groups of local people and brokering discussions, creating opportunities for people to form groups, develop and grow their capacity to act.

In the year since the launch of the Big Society it is now time to look at whether it is working and more importantly, whether it is what we need in the future.

In a society where our problems are global, complex and interweaving, the state alone can't tackle these. The involvement of citizens and communities is vital in developing radical solutions to society's biggest problems. The vision of the Big Society is one where local community groups step up to this challenge and take more responsibility tackling these issues through establishing mutuals, social enterprises and cooperatives at the very grass roots level in order to run services instead or alongside the state.

Evidence so far shows that while things are slowly

starting to develop in some communities, it is not clear whether these are services that will help to tackle the complex issues that we face. We are seeing a form of the Big Society, but perhaps not the one intended.

The CLG vanguard authorities – those authorities that have direct access to support and guidance from CLG – show limited progress one year on since they were conceived. Reported successes include participatory budgeting schemes, adopting a street, getting volunteers to run a museum and setting up a cooperative to take over a pub and put it into community use.

These are all great initiatives, but arguably they are peripheral. Do they address the big ticket, hard hitting

problems that society has to address in order to meet the needs of future generations? If not we are still left with questions on whether the Big Society is the answer to public service reform in the future.

Of course, it is not possible to know the long term impacts of these small scale innovations. Perhaps they contribute to increased social capital and are vital first steps towards creating a bigger society. But we do not know whether it will be possible to scale up these small innovations to tackle larger and more problematic areas. So whilst these more marginal services may help us understand more about what the public values and they may help to cultivate social capital; in the long term, we don't know whether either of these things will help us to tackle big issues. And we don't know how to find out.

So we must ask: how can we scale up smaller scale innovation and how can communities continue to take the lead on this? Arguably, town and parish councils, as the most local democratically elected bodies, have a vital role in delivering the Big Society agenda – in helping to foster innovation and leading communities to deliver on the ground and shape the agenda for the future.

Town and parish councils are in many ways, the Big Society already in action – and there is no reason why these bodies can't become more ambitious in scope and scale. The Localism Bill will provide a stepping

stone towards doing this by giving more powers to local neighbourhoods, thereby giving them opportunities to grow the Big Society. For instance, some councils will be able to use the general power of competence, giving them the means to do more in their communities (as long as it is legal!). What is more, they are in the fortunate position of having powers but few statutory duties, which gives them the flexibility to act.

More specifically, town and parish councils can play a key role in bringing together groups of local people and brokering discussions, creating opportunities for people to form groups, develop and grow their capacity to act. They are also in the best position to ensure that community voices are heard by key decision makers in the local area.

With these opportunities, there also comes a series of challenges that town and parish councils will have to work through in order to take the Big Society to the next level. How can parishes grow small scale innovation into something bigger? This is not only a physical question of crossing parish boundaries, but also one of resource and influence. Perhaps a much bigger challenge is around the role of parishes in cultivating long term culture change within communities which encourages people to think and act in a big society way.

If the Big Society is to really take off, it is not about small scale innovation, mutuals or even resources,

it is actually about mind-set: people have to want to change the way that they live and behave within their communities. Town and parish councils can play a vital role in instigating this change.

Laura Wilkes

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Planning and the Big Society

With power will come responsibility, but hopefully also a greater trust in the democratic process, and an ability to place shape.

As one of two groups (the other being a neighbourhood forum) able to develop a neighbourhood plan, parish councils will have a vital role to play once the Localism Bill is enacted – offering an established structure to guide communities through potential early uncertainties regarding the process, and providing a means to link planner and resident going forward. Though neighbourhood planning front runners such as Tattenhall in Cheshire offer an insight into how existing structures are coping with this policy evolution, it is equally important to think about the parish council of tomorrow. These may, it seems, be more urban than hitherto – since 2008 parish councils have been permitted in London, and bids are in the pipeline from

London Field's in Hackney, and Wapping, as well as the example below. Times, it appears, are changing.

Groups such as the Queen's Park Forum (QPF) in West London are showing how communities can be mobilised to take an interest in their neighbourhood, even where a formal parish council structure does not yet exist. The forum, whose initial foundation in 2003 was partly triggered by a desire to look after the local park, has mushroomed into an organisation looking to shape the area in a wider sense. After canvassing residents' demand for such a body, in 2006 elections were held to the QPF – which saw a turnout of over 20%, and 21 residents standing for office. Importantly, the QPF has not just attracted the usual suspects, but

has helped attract a new, young group of people to the political process. If planning is to represent those with the greatest stake in its outcome, it will need to seek out the young who, after all, will have to live with its consequences the longest.

The QPF is also illustrative of the link between parishisation and planning. Under the provisions of the localism bill, parish councils are set to be given some real teeth. They will be able to bring forth neighbourhood plans, and help galvanise the community from which they emerge behind them (necessary to win the automatic referendum they trigger). Early engagement, research consistently reveals, is vital in ensuring a positive planning system, and forums such as the QPF help take the contemporary pulse. For an area such as planning – where accusations of special interests have often dominated the debate – the democratic aspect of parishisation cannot be overlooked. To truly speak of “power to the people,” they will actually have to wield it.

In 2008 the QPF published their neighbourhood plan. Though non-binding, it indicated a desire amongst locals to play a role in helping plan their community’s future (certainly calls for ‘improving the environment for future generations’ and making it a ‘model of disabled’ access do not augur a lack of ambition). Little surprise then that in early 2011, just months after the

draft Localism Bill had formally linked parish councils and town planning, the QPF launched its bid for parish council status. In June they presented a 1600 signature petition to Westminster Council (double the required amount), who are currently reviewing the application.

Both the planning process and local residents alike can gain from their intertwining. Whilst gaining absolute consensus behind any given plan is unlikely, devolving planning to the lowest possible level produces a greater degree of understanding in the process. Planning is complex and difficult. Involving residents through parish councils not only helps them see the necessary tradeoffs inherent in the system, but helps them shape their locality whilst doing so. Despite the claims of some, all roads do not have to lead to NIMBYism. If, as mooted, parish councils gain access to development incentives such as the Community Infrastructure Levy and New Homes Bonus this may also produce a shift in attitudes. From merely (sometimes grudgingly) accepting the case by case use of Section 106 monies, parish councils may well be given access to a pot of money which can be used for more overarching, community wide purposes. With power will come responsibility, but hopefully also a greater trust in the democratic process, and an ability to place shape.

As the QPF illustrates, there is a latent demand amongst residents to help shape neighbourhoods.

The General Power of Competence – which allows local authorities (including, where applicable, parish councils) to do anything that is not explicitly barred by statute – offers an opportunity for those who wish to plan to do so creatively. And if localism means subsidiarity where possible, then this is an important moment for our democracy. If the public really are as tired as contemporary polls indicate with politicians in general, then there could be few better ways to break this cycle than to get people involved in the nitty-gritty of local planning.

Though a defining moment, the Localism Bill does not reinvent the planning wheel. For it to have the most rewarding consequences, both in terms ensuring of sustainable growth and gaining a consensus behind it, it is important that the lowest rung on the political ladder – the parish council – becomes actively engaged. Whether it be through finding potential planners, instructing them as to their purpose, or canvassing local feeling, the success of the new national planning policy framework may depend as much on community hall as it does Whitehall. It will be interesting to see where all this goes next.

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