



Policy briefing 42: Building a Big Society – the Conservative party’s vision for social renewal

April 2010

Introduction

On 31st March 2010 the Conservative party launched their '[Big Society](#)' proposals which are aimed at increasing people's engagement in community actions. Such engagement is necessary for the party to implement proposals to reduce the size and bureaucracy of Government. This follows several previous Conservative party publications which have been used to hone their proposals for working with the voluntary and community sector, as described in a previous [LVSC briefing](#).

What does this new paper say?

This new paper refines the Conservative parties policy proposals down to three main areas:

- Public service reform
- Creating and developing neighbourhood groups
- Culture change to encourage mass community engagement.

They list a number of specific policies under each of these headings:

Public service reform concentrates on the development of social enterprises that can deliver public services. Although they mention charities and voluntary groups, this model concentrates very much on investment, where such groups would be supported to develop sufficiently to be able to deliver public contracts under a payment-by results model.

In order to support such models they propose to set up an independent 'Big Society' bank that will provide investment for social organisations through new models such as [Social Impact Bonds](#). The implication is that, once sufficiently developed, all such organisations should be financially self-supporting through their delivery of public service contracts.

The current Government has already committed to developing a similar Social Investment Wholesale Bank using unclaimed funds from dormant accounts. The Conservative party argues that they

have delayed the introduction of such a bank for three years and have limited initial capital to £75million.

Creating and developing neighbourhood groups lists a whole range of policy proposals that will enable neighbourhoods to take control of running services such as parks, libraries, post offices and schools. The stated aim is that 'every adult in the country becomes an active member of an active neighbourhood group'.

The Conservative party commits to provide grant funding to create and develop neighbourhood groups in the most deprived areas using part of the annual 'Futurebuilders' fund. The grants will be designed to encourage match-funding from non-governmental sources. Neighbourhood groups are specifically defined in the paper as those that comprise of people living in a defined geographical area. This raises concerns about funding for community of interest groups, whose members are often some of the most excluded.

The paper also promises to fund a network of 5,000 'little platoons' of independent community organisers who will raise funds to pay for their own salaries, help communities to establish and operate neighbourhood groups and tackle social challenges.

Encouraging social action is about developing a cultural change so that every adult becomes involved in their community. Its first proposal is to promote this among civil servants by ensuring that it is part of their staff appraisal.

The second proposal is to launch a 'Big Society' day, a national event encouraging more people to take part in neighbourhood groups and social action projects. The Labour party has previously proposed a national 'Democracy' day.

Reaction to the proposals

Most voluntary and community sector commentators have welcomed the emphasis on the sector and commitment to community organising and social action approaches.

Questions raised have included:

- Is it reasonable to expect every adult to be an active member of an active neighbourhood group? How will issues of time, skills, confidence and willingness to be involved be addressed?
- With no government funding, will the network of community organisers be successfully maintained through applying for their own funds, when their projects may take many years to demonstrate tangible benefits?

- How will equality and discrimination be addressed if there is no government funding for single community groups but only for geographically-based neighbourhood groups?
- How will neighbourhood groups be supported to deliver some of the complex projects and powers that are discussed in this paper, such as involvement in local planning and running services that are no longer commercially viable? And if they do not take over such projects will they just no longer be provided?
- Can voluntary and community sector groups retain their independence if the majority of their funding might come from delivering public services, philanthropy and social investment, all of which devolve some power to the funders?
- How can the commitment to grant funding for social action projects be squared with the resistance to public funds being used for 'political campaigning'?
- With the focus on funding outcomes from public service delivery, what outcomes are going to be expected from the community organisers?



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