



Seminar briefing – July 2010

# What Is Big Society?

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***On Monday 5<sup>th</sup> July 18 organisations from the local voluntary and community sector in Kensington and Chelsea met together to discuss the Big Society. Hosted by the Social Council, the seminar provided the sector with the opportunity to look at the Big Society in detail and to determine its possible impact at a local level.***

## Discussion One

**Is Big Society really about the redistribution of power away from government to the people so they can take more control of their own lives or is it an attempt at a DIY society to get government on the cheap as branded by the Labour Party?**

**The Government** argues that the Labour administration had '*crowded out social action and eroded social responsibility*'. This has led to people feeling disengaged and disempowered and less active as citizens. They argue that the state cannot fix problems in society on its own and that everyone needs to take part.

**Participants** felt that the Big Society agenda has positive aspects that could empower individuals and communities to take greater responsibility in shaping their local area, providing a mandate from government for this to happen. However, the fear is that this is a cost cutting exercise with too much emphasis on the voluntary and community sector being able to deliver public services for less.

## Discussion Two

**Is the voluntary and community sector in a good position to deliver public services?**

**The Government** talks about co-operatives, mutuals, social enterprises and voluntary organisations playing more of a role in delivering public services under contracts. A Big Society bank, funded by unclaimed back assets will support organisations to do this and will provide investment under new models such as social impact bonds. They are especially keen on social enterprises and want to support more organisations set up and develop so that they are able to bid for government contracts. Their ideas also include encouraging public sector employees to set up their own co-ops to bid to take over the services they deliver.

**Participants** argued that it is not always appropriate for voluntary and community organisations to become social enterprises. The term social enterprise is used too loosely with the assumption that voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) can easily become social enterprises.

It has to be considered that VCOs may need to become incorporated to become social enterprises and this does not always fit the model of many small run community groups. What would happen to those groups in the future? There is concern that the rolling back of the state will mean increasing competition between social enterprises and the voluntary and community sector in the delivery of public services.

There is a real sense that the sector needs support to explore the social enterprise model and that organisations could strengthen their power base through consortia to bid for public services.

### Discussion Three

**How practical is it to expect everyone to be civically engaged, where might this be problematic and where might it be inspiring?**

**The Government's** ideas to empower communities include encouraging local residents to take over local amenities such as parks and libraries and saving local facilities threatened with closure by taking them over. There are also plans to allow parents to set up new schools, like the free schools in Sweden.

They also want local residents to have more of an influence on planning and how the local authority spends its money and to enable local residents to better hold the public sector to account. There will also be a new right to data from government and the police.

The Government is keen to encourage the development of neighbourhood groups in every area which - they are calling '*little platoons*' and - will be given new powers and rights. They say that their ambition is for '*every adult in the country to be an active member of an active neighbourhood group*'. These may be new groups or ones that are already established such as residents associations and community groups for a specific area.

The Government also want to provide neighbourhood grants taken from the Futurebuilders Fund to fund charities and social enterprises working with neighbourhood groups in the poorest areas. Match funding from non-governmental sources will be encouraged. These will provide an incentive for people to come together and form neighbourhood groups and also for charities and social enterprises to support the creation of neighbourhood groups.

The Government says that it will fund the training of 'an army' of 5,000 independent community organisers to help communities establish or help develop these neighbourhood groups and help develop community leaders. These community organisers will need to raise funds for their own salaries.

**Participants** said that in some respects the fact that communities could take over public amenities could be seen as real empowerment at the most practical of levels. However, they questioned how it would be supported, particularly around complex projects where appropriate skills and knowledge to take over services are lacking.

There were some mixed feelings regarding the setting up of free schools. Whilst some participants felt it could be advantageous for some equalities groups, others felt that this could increase divisions in communities and divert money away from existing schools. Also evidence from free schools in Sweden has shown that it has not been very successful and has mostly benefited children of parents from highly educated families.

Some participants expressed concerns that the BME residents do not join residents associations in the borough due to language and other social barriers. There is concern that this will also be the case with the proposed neighbourhood group structure.

There was also concern that some neighbourhood groups would be stronger than others and would be advocating only for their own interests, in their own geographical area, thereby creating more division between areas and thus reinforcing parochialism.

The final concern on neighbourhood groups was the prescriptive way in which it was described without any reference to the way in which people engage and identify with each other in ways other than based on geographical location. This further raised concern around the future of funding for single issue groups including BME VCOs.

Suggested ways to improve the setting up of neighbourhood groups would be to ensure that they are all linked with each other. The coming together of neighbourhood groups would foster a shared sense of community across the borough. Neighbourhood groups should also work with BME and other equalities groups to ensure that there are increased opportunities for their voices to be heard and for them to join neighbourhood groups.

Participants felt that community organising does exist locally and there was a strong feeling that, if community organisers were trained, they should be local people trained locally. Infrastructure organisations like the Social Council would be best placed to train local community organisers. This approach would ensure the community organiser's accountability to the local community. It was also suggested that community organisers should be democratically elected as in the case of local councillors.

There was further concern expressed that the raising of their own funds would not encourage people from disadvantaged groups to become community organisers.

### **General Comments on the Big Society**

- Is what is being proposed any different to what the voluntary and community sector already do in Kensington and Chelsea? Participants felt that they already contribute to social action and shared social responsibility.
- There is also no mention of the role of infrastructure organisations like the Social Council (though they do mention funding 'intermediary bodies' to help support social enterprise development and they give examples of these as charitable trusts, social investment organisations or local councils). Participants felt that there is still a strong role that exists for organisations like the Social Council, to continue bringing the sector together to strengthen social action.
- Big Society could mean that only those people with the resources, skills, confidence and time will get involved – how will it appeal locally to everyone in the borough?
- Whilst the Big Society at a practical level is still unclear, it is a real opportunity for the sector to help shape and influence the agenda locally. There may be good opportunities for this to happen as it was felt that the sector is the natural vehicle through which people get engaged in their communities.
- There are concerns that future funding cuts could undermine the sectors ability to contribute to the plans of Big Society.

### **Views from Kensington and Chelsea Social Council**

If the 'Big Society' is about the devolution of power from central to local government, and about giving power to local communities then its starting point must be the way in which Borough connects with the local community and how the local community connect with each other. By understanding what makes people connect with each other, we will be at the beginning of a process which will be easier to understand and develop.

If localism is to really flourish then the agenda should not become too prescriptive, it should ebb and flow, allowing people to come together only when they need to. The processes should be simple to understand and easy for people to negotiate their way through. When people do

come together to decide on a particular project, there should be adequate support and resources available to them to develop skills and knowledge.

Where the public sector may see opportunities to form cooperatives to deliver services, this should not conflict with the voluntary and community sector. Both sectors should work together to see where current services might compliment each other and what opportunities exist to work together in partnership.

There still needs to be strong leadership from the Kensington and Chelsea Partnership in driving the vision for Big Society. Leadership that will inspire the local community to get involved and to follow by example.

### **Next Steps For The Social Council**

- Participants want to be kept informed of Big Society developments and ask that the Social Council set up a web page on their website or through their general communication.
- Participants requested that a briefing on this meeting be sent to the next KCP meeting to express the sector's concerns and ideas.
- Participants feel strongly that Big Society is happening here already and argue the case that development should start small and building on what already exists.
- Participants would like to see Nick Hurd MP (Minister for Civil Society) or Councilor Tim Ahern invited to the Social Council's AGM in the autumn to address Big Society.
- There is a strong case, now more than ever, that the sector should be developing more formal partnerships and consortia. Participants would like the Social Council to lead on this work.

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