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The Big Society: How it Could Work

A positive idea at risk from caricature

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1. Introduction

The big society is an important idea which should be pursued and implemented irrespective of the rest of the political package. Presented as if wholly new, it is in fact a refreshment and amplification of a cross-party theme that has been building up for decades. All three main parties have made important contributions to it over the past generation (the Libdems on local councils which they have led), and all three urgently need to take it forward in the period of economic retribution which began on 6th May.

Since Labour and the Libdems had few clear ideas about local community invigoration in their 2010 election manifestos, and since it had dropped out of the Labour government narrative in the preceding two years despite significant strides up to then, macro political initiative on this issue currently rests with the Conservatives. The other parties must not let this rebranding stop them from making or supporting essential advances on community participation, both locally and nationally.

However, the portfolio of measures put forward under the big society heading¹ need to be carefully sifted if they are to work in the intended way. It would be futile to expect the policy to work if it is treated simply as a diversion from massive reductions in public services. There are voices on the left that will automatically define it as such, and voices on the right that would even welcome it as such. It will need to steer a careful course if it is not to be strangled at birth by these mirrored antagonists or evaporate into superficiality.

As a start let's distinguish the bona fide elements from the albatrosses. The acid test for each proposed action is whether it would lead to the inner

¹ ie in the Conservative election manifesto 2010, and listed in section 6 of this paper

strengthening of local community life. This has payoffs in terms of three interactive forces in communities: the growth of social capital, the enrichment of democracy and beneficial effects on public services. The public service effect cannot be achieved in isolation.

2. Communities cannot take over public services

Most of the policy does not rest on the idea of communities 'taking over' mainstream public services but that is how it is caricatured in much of the media treatment - and perhaps how it is understood by many people who might support it for the wrong reasons. Before the caricature is taken for reality, let us be clear as to why this massive oversimplification would rapidly lead to failure.

Very few people actually want to or are in a position to run a statutory public service. Even if they did, this would not amount to a takeover by a community but would simply shift any problems of service delivery and community engagement from a large organisation to a small one. This might have some advantages in terms of local identity and personal touch and disadvantages in terms of lack of necessary skills and systems. It would not automatically ensure a better or cheaper service or greater acceptability to the wide community of users.

Individual community organisations or social enterprises may want to bid for contracts to run some specialised element of a local public service. They already have the opportunity to do so when services are outsourced. This does not amount to the community running its own service. However well-rooted in its community, the bidding organisation is still only a tiny fraction of that community and faces the same issues of quality, meeting standards and user satisfaction as any other deliverer.

If part of a statutory service is taken over, it rightly has to meet with public standards and therefore has to carry with it a good deal of the bureaucracy that goes with that. Equally, if the provider, whether private or voluntary, receives full cost recovery, which they would need to do if the service is to be stable, there is not necessarily any saving to the public purse.

3. Communities can complement and co-produce public services

Quite different from this is the prospect of community groups *helping to manage* a public service or *developing their own non-statutory form of service with public sector support*. Each of these two alternatives has much wider potential application and does help the inner strengthening of the community.

The picture is radically different for these two other important forms of participation. The underlying principle for these is not the state offloading

public services but state and people working together to ensure maximum value either from a public service or from a voluntary service initiated by a community group. It is this that will make public services more efficient and economical, and communities more capable, whereas attempting to offload services wholesale to local communities would cause chaos to the services and overburden and finally destroy community groups.

Most of the successful examples in this field, often put forward misleadingly under headings such as community control or 'taking over public services', are actually sharing of both power and delivery by a public service and a community organisation. Tenant management organisations, friends of parks groups, police-resident liaison groups and many others perform this co-operative function. The benefit is not only a better-run service but residents having a deeper experience of active citizenship and democracy.

Building up social enterprise as part of local economic development is another important objective linked with third sector development but is not a substitute for strengthening communities (see PACES paper on the Hidden Economy of the Third Sector).

Equally, for the purpose of spreading involvement, the practice of transferring underused or failing physical amenities to community groups has far less going for it than arrangements for community groups to help manage amenities. Groups which take on full ownership and liabilities of public amenities have to devote their main energies to making them work as businesses. Often they are quite soon forced to price out smaller groups which have little money to pay commercial rates for use of the service. The arrangement usually works better where groups help to manage and run amenities whilst the public authority retains ultimate responsibility and liability, and ensures that the service is available affordably for smaller groups.

4. Organising community organisers

Amongst the most important ideas in the cluster is that of mobilising a major new cohort of community organisers. But again the factors that will make for success or failure are in the small print. The notion that these workers should have to find their own funding reduces the idea to triviality, whereas they are actually needed to hold the whole of the rest of the policy together. It is these workers who must link the various components in neighbourhoods and localities and drive them towards the unifying goal of active cooperation between state and society.

There is no fundamental difference between the US concept of community organisers and the UK (and elsewhere) concept of community development workers. But whatever the label, rethinking and reorganising of the role is needed if it is to have major impact. Some of the necessary thinking and evidence-gathering has been taking place over the last few years and some is showcased on this website. What has been lacking, particularly in the last

two years - after significant strides over the preceding ten - has been a high-level policy commitment.

Funding of such workers by non-state sources has the advantage of independence of political control, and where voluntary organisations or networks are in a position to do this they make an important contribution. However, this is not a simple or large scale solution. Half of such workers are indirectly funded by the state or the local authority and many are on short term or part time contracts². In many such positions in voluntary organisations it is also difficult to get the flexibility and resources to participate in the professional networks which are needed to build cumulative effect.

If community organisers have to find their own funding, in many cases they will either not materialise at all or they will be accountable to a cocktail of different funders having different criteria, priorities, reporting requirements and timescales. This would make it impossible for them to play a leading local role. They would also have to spend a disproportionate amount of their working time simply chasing the funding. This is already all too familiar for many community workers and is one of the main reasons why the existing role is less effective than it should be.

What is needed to make the big society work is not simply more community workers or organisers but a wave of 'super' community development workers with the status and training to be able to mobilise and coordinate a myriad of contributions to citizen empowerment from other voluntary and statutory front-line workers. This means that these individuals will have to be credible community involvement leaders in the eyes of other local workers. They will have to be genuinely experienced and gifted in this complex and demanding field. Our work for the HCA (see *Empowerment Skills for All*) shows that this is where the transformative potential lies, but this cannot be done on a shoestring.

This means that the role is not simply about supporting neighbourhood groups, though this is at the heart of it. It is also about managing the interface between those groups and the public services, guiding both to greater efficiency and effectiveness. Using the best of both UK and US sources, a new CD remit and curriculum should be devised, enabling the workers to play this pivotal role.

5. Funding and accountability

How then should this role be paid for and to whom should it be accountable? Instead of a notional 5,000 self-funding workers it would if necessary be better to start with a smaller cohort of properly paid workers with the experience, special training and authority to take a coordinating role, and

² Peter Taylor, *Who Are the Capacity Builders?* Community Development Foundation, 2006

who would have credibility with the thousands more workers who can contribute to this vision as part of their front line work on any social issue.

An initial cohort of 2,000 would provide a team of about 12 per principal local authority. This would cost about £100m a year. Some calculation of this kind must have been made in connection with the Tories' commitment to provide 4,200 new health visitors attached to Sure Start. Some of these might be able to convert into more generalist CD workers. But important community roles should not have to compete with each other for funding when sums in the multiple billions are still in the budget for capital projects like high speed railways and rebuilding of schools.

This key local coordinating role cannot be established without democratic accountability. These roles should therefore be linked into Local Strategic Partnerships, but also with effective links to more local structures such as neighbourhood management partnerships and community led planning. They should operate as teams with a strategic cross-issue remit to ensure that they are not swallowed up into the establishments of large silos, and should be linked to a national unit with regional arms to ensure consistency of objectives and authority for their leveraging and negotiating role in relation to those big local departments.

Even - or especially - at the present time this should be a top priority investment. It should be linked to monitoring of cost benefits in terms of greater efficiencies and reduced costs to the mainstream budgets for local safety, education, health and welfare. With higher profile and status, and using the principle of mobilising complementary inputs from across the public services, it should be possible to make a decisive impact over five years. As the cost-benefits are documented, subsequent cohorts of these workers should be resourced.

6. Tweaking the details

Looking then at some of the individual components of the big society policy in this critical-friendly perspective we would make the following observations, using our criterion of whether each component would strengthen community life:

Item (our numbering)	Strength	Weakness	Qualification/ condition of success
1. Use cabinet office budgets to fund the training of independent community organisers to help people establish and run neighbourhood groups	Fundamental role in coordinating the other elements of the policy	Have to find their own funding. Inadequate focus on distinctive local coordinating role	Fund properly. Ensure the training and remit situates them in a pivotal relationship to existing community workers and other agencies. The coherence of the rest of the programme depends on them and should shape the design of their role, training and deployment
2. Every adult to be a member of a local neighbourhood group	Good aspiration	Danger of sounding obligatory	Make clear this is voluntary and is for their own satisfaction and to enhance people's own social capital not as free labour for government
3. Restore Sure Start to original focus on helping disadvantaged	Good	-	Examine why this focus was lost and how to prevent it happening again. SureStarts and children's centres should be remodelled on the best existing examples of parent and community involvement
4. 4,200 new SureStart health visitors	Good	-	These are examples of the kind of front-line role with a natural interface with the community which can build trust, link with community organisers and help transform the morale of stressed neighbourhoods, ultimately saving significant costs. See Health Empowerment Leverage Project

5. 5% of local population can instigate a referendum	Could help to invigorate local democracy	Danger of factional use. Danger of decisions driven by a minority of the local population who are more aware of the process	Make clear that results would only have force if a majority of local residents (not just of those who vote) support them and if they have been proofed for not having adverse effects on community life in any neighbourhood of the local authority. See Conclusion point (i).
6. Local people can veto council tax increases	-	Likely to be used by better off people and could damage services for the less well off. Could cause havoc with service planning	
7. Community right to buy threatened amenities	May have merit as a last resort not a first one	Could encourage authorities to neglect or downgrade amenities in order to offload them	Oblige authorities to commission independent review of whether there is still a need for the amenity and if so reinstate and improve it. If need is dubious the community should be offered the right to help <i>run</i> the amenity in partnership with the authority. Failing that, the right to buy should apply
8. Right to bid to run any community service instead of the state		Too sweeping. No clear rationale.	Break down into analysis of types of service for which this might be appropriate and under what conditions
9. Potential for cooperative ownership of football clubs	Worth investigating feasibility and value		

10. End ringfencing of government grants to LAs 'so that funding can be spent on local priorities'		Could conflict with basic entitlements and lead to priorities chosen by sectional interests	Not compatible with essence of big society idea
11. Scrapping the hundreds of process targets labour have imposed on councils		Misconceived. Process targets have already been jettisoned in favour of outcome targets, which have also been reduced. Targets should be used sensibly not abandoned altogether.	Targets for community strengths in particular should be retained - volunteering, influence and thriving third sector, to make this area more visible, and in order to show that progress can be objectively measured and that cost benefits can be established
12. Ending the bureaucratic inspection regime that stops councils focusing on residents' main concerns		Misconceived. Inspection is now largely by a combination of universal criteria and local intelligence	
13. Encouraging the greater use of ward budgets for councillors	Good if used for participatory budgeting	Bad if used for patronage or compensation for poor main services	Use not only to encourage creative extras but as a learning mechanism for residents to understand and influence main budgets

14. Participation in social action recognised in civil servants' appraisals	Good		Not just experience of volunteering in a professionally-led voluntary organisation but provide guiding framework to ensure a positive and balanced experience including understanding dilemmas facing neighbourhood groups
15. Annual big society day to celebrate the work of neighbourhood groups	Good		
16. Funding from the big society bank to intermediary bodies with a track record of supporting and growing social enterprises	Good to access this source	No reason to limit to infrastructure bodies or social enterprises	Infrastructure bodies must demonstrate increased benefits and satisfaction of user groups. A % of the money should be used for grants to neighbourhood groups matched by tallying additional volunteering
17. Develop a measure of wellbeing that encapsulates the social value of state action	Potentially good	Unclear. Should it be 'the value of social action to the state'?	
18. Stimulate the creation and development of neighbourhood groups which can take action to improve their local area	Good. Fundamental to the big society concept		

19. Provide neighbourhood grants to poorest areas to ensure they play a leading role in the rebuilding of civic society	Good. Fundamental to the big society concept		
20. National citizen service programme for 16 year olds to develop the skills needed to be active and responsible citizens	Potentially helpful	Past schemes of this kind have often become simply directive schemes of youth volunteering	Learn from past initiatives of this kind to avoid pitfalls. Must be genuine element of influence and decision making if it is to lead to active citizenship
21. (Use the latest insights from behavioural economics to) encourage people to make volunteering and community participation something they do on a regular basis	Main idea is good	Initial phrase is superfluous and sounds doctrinaire	
22. Give parents the power to save local schools threatened by closure, allowing communities the chance to take over	Potentially useful under certain conditions	Could encourage LAs to offload schools. Misconception about 'communities' - only specific organisations can run an institution	Authorities should first have to show they have made every effort to retain and improve the school. Concern should not be limited to parents of existing pupils. Many lose interest as their children leave school. As explained in text, joint running by community groups and the public authority is usually more

and run good small schools			viable than 'taking over'. Schools should still be required to be 'extended', acting as a resource to the whole community, not just to parents of current pupils.
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7. Conclusion: making it work

The components of the big society policy need to be configured into a coherent package, and gaps need to be identified and filled. These four elements at least need to be added:

(i) Community proofing of new policy. All public policies should have to have a community impact assessment, similar to risk assessment or environmental impact assessment, to draw out their likely impact on local community life, and this should be considered before they are agreed. For example the introduction of 24-hour drinking with its disastrous effects on night-time town centre life might never have got through if it had been subjected to such an assessment.

(ii) The extensive data now available on the profile of the community and voluntary sector at www.nstso.com (see *Thriving Third Sector*) should be analysed to show the position and concerns of neighbourhood and community groups. But the interface between such groups and the daily life of households and individuals remains extremely foggy. This needs to be illuminated if we are to understand how to fully animate the potential for community involvement. Research should also be carried out into the obstacles faced when neighbourhood groups are trying to set themselves up or which fail.

(iii) An agenda for spreading empowerment skills to all workers who interface with local communities has been formulated and needs to be put into operation - see *Empowerment Skills for All*. It is only through this multiplier effect that a relatively small cohort of community organisers could have a nationally significant effect.

(iv) The 'Duty to Involve' laid on public authorities in 2008 should be rebalanced so that it is not just about involving people in the functions of public authorities but about authorities getting involved in initiatives from communities.

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