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The Big Society and Public Services: complementarity or erosion?

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About PACES

Community Empowerment Through the Recovery

Launched in April 2010, PACES is dedicated to deepening local democracy at a time when it is threatened by cynicism and a sense of being disempowered by forces too large to control.

PACES works with public, private and third sector organisations to integrate the improvement of services, the empowerment of communities and the invigoration of local democracy.

Developed by Gabriel Chanan and Colin Miller, PACES provides tailor-made strategies, guidance and consultancy based on an exceptionally wide background and track record in national and local government, local communities and voluntary organisations.

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Note: we use lower case throughout for ‘big society’ as we think the use of capitals gives a spurious impression that it is a concrete programme or entity rather than a concept, and this is one of the sources of confusion around the term

Executive summary

1. The Prime Minister's original intention for the big society was about strengthening of communities and nurturing personal responsibility amongst citizens.
2. As the big society practical agenda emerges, the objectives of community empowerment and personal responsibility are in danger of being lost.
3. The aim of strengthening communities is being confused with the running of public services by voluntary organisations and social enterprises.
4. Empowering communities means strengthening mutual aid, social capital, volunteering, local democracy and also the voice of the community vis a vis public services.
5. The main vehicle for strengthening communities is the independent activities of the mass of community groups, which are not social enterprises.
6. The National Survey of Third Sector Organisations shows that local community groups are by far the majority of the sector.
7. The mass of independent community groups initiate and pursue their own independent activities, not selling services or bidding to take over services defined by public bodies.
8. Community groups consist wholly or almost wholly of members and volunteers. They do not seek full cost recovery for their work. They need background support in the form of community development, small grants, meeting space, cooperative networks and skills for active citizenship.
9. Community groups are independent of the state, hence are the authentic expression and voice of the community. Whereas social enterprises naturally seek to sell a service at full cost recovery, community groups just need background support in order to make the maximum impact, but only a small minority are getting it.
10. The cost-benefit of state support for community groups is not that they take over public services but that they take pressure off them by spreading wellbeing in their own ways.
11. The first responsibility of big society must be a strong policy to support community activity in its own right. Diversifying providers and encouraging social enterprises only makes sense as supplementary to this.
12. Growth of social enterprises is important for the local economy but is not a substitute for the strengthening of the community. Social enterprises consist mainly of professional staff, not members or volunteers.

13. Social enterprises and professionally-led charities, however skilled and however empathetic to communities, are businesses and cannot be the voice of local communities

13. Running public services makes voluntary organisations more, not less, dependent on the state.

14. Agencies which commission public services from third sector organisations or anyone else must remain responsible for ensuring standards are met.

15. Larger community groups can take on a social enterprise function to support their main purposes so long as they do not confuse the two roles. Big society policy should help them enhance their primary role not just take on more business.

16. The big society agenda contains elements which would strengthen communities but these are weakened and their inadequate scale concealed by being incorporated into the public service commissioning agenda.

17. The presentation of big society as new, and the absence of any baseline, combined with a rush by the more professionalised voluntary and community organisations to rebrand themselves as big society, makes it difficult to see whether community strengthening is growing or not.

18. The main instrument for strengthening local communities and their groups is community development.

19. The big society's 'community organisers' would in effect be community development workers. The absence of any recognition of community development in the big society narrative cuts it off from a rich current of experience and threatens to repeat avoidable mistakes.

20. Community development practice itself needs reforming and expanding, and some principles for this are already in place.

21. Community organisers' training should take account of the community development tradition and pick up from the reform movement within it.

22. Big society and community development should work together on a mutual improvement agenda.

23. The big society remains potentially a bold idea which could change society for the better but only if the empowerment element is made the leading edge instead of the poor relation.

24. Big society policy should be divided into two clear streams, one regarding strengthening communities and one regarding service provision - a 'provider-user split'. Each should have its own distinct objectives, criteria and mechanisms. Strengthening communities would include strengthening their ability to hold service providers to account, no matter what sector those

providers were in. The Big Society bank should provide grants to community organisations as well as loans to social enterprises.

25. Infrastructure groups in the voluntary and community sector have a vital role to play in supporting both empowerment and social enterprises. They may themselves be social enterprises but it is essential that they and those who commission them are clear about the primacy of the community empowerment role and that this is reflected in distinct objectives and workstreams.

1. The emerging concept

One of the first clear statements of the aim of the big society was David Cameron's Hugo Young memorial speech in November 2009. He sketched a vision for 'a fundamental realignment of the role of the state'. Its role should be not only as a provider of essential services but as more of an enabler, to 'actively create the big society, directly agitating for, catalysing and galvanising social renewal'¹. Six months later he was equally emphatic: 'You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment. You can call it freedom. You can call it responsibility. I call it the big society... the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street'²

In a talk to the King's Fund, Matt Leach from the think tank ResPublica summarised the role of the Big Society enthusiastically as being 'a broad vision and a work in progress...a fundamental generational shift'³. In a constructively critical paper, the New Economics Foundation described the big society, as 'the Government's big idea for structural change and social renewal'⁴, adding 'there is no master plan or blueprint, because the government says it wants decisions to be taken locally'.

There is clearly a paradox in the attempt to create a bottom-up movement from the top down, and the government recognised in practice that if it wanted to foster real change it would need to put some guidelines and support in place whilst continuing to urge widespread local action. Six months after the election more detail began to emerge. The Office for Civil Society published a strategy for 'building a stronger civil society', a consultation on 'improving support for frontline civil society organisations' and an open letter from Ministers Francis Maude and Nick Hurd to the third sector about 'the opportunities and challenges for charities, social enterprises, voluntary and community groups'⁵. Shortly afterwards the Cabinet Office published a hurried consultation paper on principles of commissioning from third sector bodies⁶.

¹ Cameron, D. (2009, November 10). *The Big Society*. : www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/David_Cameron_The_Big_Society.aspx

² David Cameron, 18 May 2010, cited in *Supporting a Stronger Civil Society*, as note 5

³ Leach, M. (2010, October 20). *The Big Society and Health*.

www.kingsfund.org.uk/events/past_events_catch_up/health_care_and_the.html

⁴ New Economics Foundation (2010). *Cutting it: The 'Big Society' and the new austerity*. London: NEF.

⁵ Cabinet Office. (2010). *Supporting a Stronger Civil Society*. Consultation paper. Office for Civil Society. London: HM Government.

Cabinet Office. (2010). *Building A Stronger Civil Society: a strategy for voluntary and community groups, charities and social enterprises*. Cabinet Office, Offers for Civil Society. London: HM Government.

Francis Maude and Nick Hurd, Letter to VCS organisations, Cabinet Office, Nov 2010 (undated) The titles of the OCS documents refer to 'civil society' not 'big society', but the introduction to the strategy evidently equates these terms.

⁶ Cabinet Office, *Modernising commissioning: increasing the role of charities, social enterprises, mutuals and cooperatives in public service delivery*. Undated. Issued 7 Dec 2010. For consultation response by Wed 5 January but 'welcome early contributions wherever possible'.

Big society principles were also woven, albeit very unevenly, into the new policies of some of the large spending departments. The action plan for the department of Communities and Local Government was dominated by big society rhetoric: ‘...Designed to turn government on its head, taking power away from Whitehall and putting it into the hands of people and communities’⁷. The Public Health section of the health White Paper was less effusive, situating big society principles alongside government rather than overturning it: ‘The new service will harness the efforts of the whole of government, the NHS and the big society to improve the public’s health’⁸.

2. Where we came in

PACES had been one of the first voices to welcome the Big Society in a measured way when we published our assessment of its potential strengths and possible pitfalls in our paper ‘The Big Society: How It Could Work’ immediately after the 2010 election⁹. Our paper welcomed the overall idea of the big society, but saw its specific components as somewhat of a ragbag of proposals, some good, some bad, some either good or bad depending on how they would be implemented. We identified 22 points from the Conservative election manifesto that seemed to fit under the Big Society banner and suggested applying to each of them the acid test of whether they would lead to the inner strengthening of community life.

We saw the idea of communities taking over public services as being illusory as a large-scale solution, and that co-production of services between communities and public sector agencies would be a more realistic, economical and productive option. We thought that the idea of deploying community organisers would only work if they were properly funded; and that, despite a glaring absence of any mention of community development, these organisers would not be essentially different from existing community development workers. It seemed to us important therefore that community organisers should learn both from the best of community development CD experience and from its mistakes.

We were in favour of stimulating the creation and development of neighbourhood groups to improve their local areas and the provision of grants to disadvantaged neighbourhoods, but were concerned that the indiscriminate bonfire of targets about these features of local life meant that soon no-one would know whether communities were being strengthened or not. And we suggested that communities should have the right to demand that ‘threatened’ or ‘failing’ local amenities should be properly run by those already responsible for them before being encouraged to buy or ‘take them over’.

We hold to these judgements, and at the end of 2010 it is possible to assess in more depth the direction in which the big society is heading.

⁷ Dept for Communities and Local Government, *Draft Structural Reform Plan*, July 2010, p1.

⁸ *Healthy Lives, Healthy People*, Dept of Health, 30 Nov 2010, CM7985

⁹ Chanan, G. & Miller C. (2010). *The Big Society: How it Could Work*. www.pacesempowerment.co.uk.

3. Putting flesh on the bones

In the Coalition's first spending review in October the Office for Civil Society (OCS) received a settlement of £470m for the three year period, about £157m a year. This was a cut of about a quarter compared with the budget of its predecessor unit under the previous government, the Office for the Third Sector. But the Maude-Hurd letter (see note 3), pointing to the simultaneous strategy document, asserted that 'our approach to the sector is about far more than funding for OCS's programmes'.

The Maude-Hurd letter lists the government actions and the programmes to which the settlement relates as follows (our numbering):

1. Community First. A small grants fund 'to help neighbourhood groups implement their own plans to improve the neighbourhood'. The volume of the fund seems likely to be on the same scale as New Labour's similar Grassroots Grants fund, about £130m for three years, or £43m a year.

2. Community Organisers. This is a training (not recruitment) programme. Where the organisers would get their posts and funding remains vague but the training would equip them to 'build and mobilise local networks and leadership to drive the change that local areas need'; and they 'will be encouraged to work with neighbourhood groups that want to apply for the Community First fund'.

3. A National Citizens' Service. This is a youth programme somewhat similar to programmes of the Prince's Trust, 'designed to promote a more cohesive and responsible society'. It will bring '16 year olds from different backgrounds together in (short) residential and community based programmes of activity'.

4. Support for co-operatives and mutuals. Private sector mentors are mobilised to advise and assist 'pathfinder' cooperatives and mutuals. This evidently relates to the emerging policy to give employees of public services the right to 'buy out' / set up their service as an independent social enterprise.

5. The big society bank. The money for this, from accounts that have been dormant for at least 15 years, appears to be extra to the Departmental settlement. Its purpose will be 'to grow the social enterprise market and make it easier for social entrepreneurs to access capital'. The bank will 'invest only through existing social investment intermediaries and not deal directly with front line organisations'.

6. Support for capacity building. This is about 'improving infrastructure support to frontline organisations' and is the subject of the consultation paper which accompanied it. The specific referents of this jargon are the umbrella groups which support voluntary and community groups across a locality – organisations such as councils of

voluntary service, rural community councils, local development trusts and so-called ‘anchor’ organisations. The 2009 national survey of third sector organisations¹⁰ showed that these are only being accessed by 18% of local community and voluntary organisations. The consultation is largely about how this can be improved.

7-8. Two items are placed under the heading of **Public Services:** renewal of the Compact between government and the voluntary and community sector, and the intention to publish a White Paper and consultation on public service reform in 2011.

9. Red tape task force: a study of ways to make it easier to run a charity, social enterprise or voluntary organisation.

It would be misleading, to say the least, to try to assess the import of these policies without reference to the surrounding conditions: in addition to cuts to the mainstream services, probable cuts of a quarter or more to local authority support to voluntary and community organisations; a cut of about a quarter in the budget of the Charities Commission, with consequent worries about its ability to monitor and detect fraud in the charity sector; cuts of 50% or more to support for the Office for Civil Society’s own ‘strategic partners’ in the voluntary and community sector; the withdrawal of quango (non departmental public body) status and funding from the Community Development Foundation; and numerous other cuts in the realm of civil society.

These are of course small beer compared to the cuts in much higher profile areas of the mainstream services but that is precisely why it is worth noting them: the same broad proportion of cutting has been applied in the big society area as in the major spending programmes despite the fact that this yields small savings and that civil society is supposed to partly compensate for exigencies in those.

Protecting and indeed enhancing the voluntary and community sector would have cost a tiny fraction of the savings in other areas. The government could revolutionise the voluntary and community sector for half of one percent of the health budget.

4. Wobbly signposts

Both the Maude-Hurd letter and the two formal documents from the Office for Civil Society begin by saying that the big society rests on a threefold strategy. However, the three items are not the same in each case. The two strategy documents use almost identical headlines but define them differently, which is seen more clearly if one sets them side by side (figure one).

Figure 1: Comparison of three principles in OCS companion documents

¹⁰ Originally called National Survey of Third Sector Organisations and full results displayed on www.nstso.com. The survey is repeated in 2010, renamed National Survey of Charities and Social Enterprises and the website renamed www.nscsesurvey.com

<i>Strategy paper: Building a Stronger Civil Society</i>	Consultation paper: Supporting a Stronger Civil Society
<p>1. 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</p>	<p>Promoting social action: we believe that more people will look for opportunities to make a difference with their time and money'</p>
<p>2. Opening up public services: the government's public service reforms will enable charities, social enterprises, private companies and employee-owned co-operatives to compete to offer people high-quality services</p>	<p>Opening up public sector contracts: we are committed to ensuring charities, social enterprises and cooperatives will have a much greater role in the running of public services</p>
<p>3. Empowering communities: giving councils and neighbourhoods more power to take decisions and shape their areas</p>	<p>Empowering local communities: those who think they can do better will have the right to bid for public contracts and take over the use of community assets. There will be much more information available to help challenge the status quo.</p>

The differences between the first and second items in figure one are not significant but the difference in the interpretation of empowering communities is shocking. Between the strategy version and the consultation version any substance in the notion of empowerment disappears, and is replaced in effect by a repetition of the point about opening up public sector contracts. Yet the whole claim to be instituting 'the most dramatic redistribution of power... to the man and woman on the street' (see note 2) depends on the empowerment point. With the three dimensions effectively reduced to two, the whole policy would become practically nothing more than increasing volunteering and state contracts for non-profit organisations.

Was this just a slip of the drafting pen or is it more significant? One need not postulate conspiracy or deliberate deception to see the brave new world of the Prime Minister's vision draining out of the implementation agenda. The parts of the programme which may have some claim to embody empowerment are the grants to community groups and the role of community organisers in supporting them. But even these are muddled by the tendency of the whole narrative of the strategy to lose sight of the role of community groups as 'the voice of people who use services' (mentioned just once) in favour of 'the right to bid for public contracts' (emphasised throughout).

If empowerment is marginalised in the OCS programme, is it perhaps more central in the much trumpeted Localism agenda led by the department of Communities and Local Government? Big society rhetoric is indeed writ large all over this. It is built on six 'Actions'¹¹:

- 1 Lift the burden of bureaucracy
- 2 Empower communities to do things their way
- 3 Increase local control of public finance
- 4 Diversify the supply of public services
- 5 Open up government to public scrutiny
- 6 Strengthen accountability to local people

It is too early to assess the full significance of these but is it possible to see gleams of empowerment in them? The bureaucracy to be 'lifted' in point 1 is about abolishing central standards and regional targets in favour of greater local authority control. The measures listed in Action 2 are a general power of competence for local authorities, a community right to buy 'local assets threatened with closure', and greater rights for residents over Planning in their neighbourhood.

Action 3 will give residents the right to veto council tax increases, local authorities power to grant discounts on business rates and lay a requirement on local authorities to allocate a proportion of money gained from local planning permissions 'back to the neighbourhood from which it was raised'.

Action 4 will give communities a 'right of challenge to run local authority services' and to 'bid for assets of value to them from which they can deliver existing or new services'. Action 5 is about both central and local government having to publish details of their spending and other processes; and Action 6 is about electing mayors of 12 cities, electing police commissioners, and residents' right to instigate referenda.

As with the OCS programme, there are possible gleams of empowerment for ordinary citizens here but the bulk of the plan is about local authorities and the farming out of public services. The authorities will on the one hand have greater flexibility in some areas but on the other will be under pressure to sell off assets and parts of services to local community organisations. 'Empowering communities to do things their way' is a splendid phrase but so far is focused just on spatial planning, local authority flexibility and once again the right to buy 'threatened' assets.

The idea that local people who are dissatisfied with the running of a public asset would see themselves as empowered by having to *buy* it and run it themselves in order to put it right is dubious. Why should they have to buy an asset for which they have already paid through their taxes? And how would the community as a whole be empowered by the sale of an asset which

¹¹ HM Government, Decentralisation and the Localism Bill: an essential guide. CLG, 2010 (December). www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1793908.pdf

belongs to all of them to an organisation which consists of only a fraction of them? There are disturbing moral and perhaps even legal questions here.

5. Confusion between encouraging providers and empowering users

In reality the potential of the both the OCS and CLG programmes to empower people depends on making clear that **bidding for public contracts** and **becoming more empowered as citizens** are two entirely different issues.

The nub of the matter is this: it is never communities as a whole which bid for or take over public services or assets. It is always and only a community or voluntary **organisation**. This organisation usually consists in a small minority of the people from the local population. Sometimes they are not from the local user population at all but are bidders from another area or a branch of a national organisation. Whatever it is, the successful organisation, as the **provider** of the service in question, cannot also be the **voice of the service users**.

Empowerment, if it has any meaning in relation to public services, means increasing the power of the **user** not the provider. What if services delivered by social enterprises are run badly? Suppose they fail to reach some of the people who need them. Suppose they have problems of delivery or accountability just as any other type of provider might do. To whom would the users complain? On whom would they seek to exert pressure? When people complain about poor public services in a few years' time will they be told 'You can't complain about the service providers - they are you'?

This confusion is not new, it is merely heightened in the big society narrative. Many third sector organisations themselves tend to fudge the categorical difference between providers and users in order to trade on the 'community-based' label.

Interchangeability of providers and users cannot be applied where agencies and staff are being fully paid to deliver a service. Service commissioners using public money must remain responsible for ensuring the delivery and quality of the service, and the deliverers must remain accountable to them.

Only once this has been made clear can we examine in what ways community-based provision could be managed so as to yield spin-off benefit in terms of strengthening community life.

The big society idea is confused, and it has elicited confused reactions. It has been presented as a shift of power from government to people, as though government possessed its power as of right and could decide as a matter of policy to 'give' some of it away. Government only has - or at least only should have - the power vested in it by the people because the people want government to do certain things that are best done collectively. The question is not, therefore, how much power government will 'give away' but whether big society will in practice be carried out in such a way as to strengthen both

civil society and the authentic role of government to the people's satisfaction, or to weaken both.

The CLG's rhetoric of 'turning government on its head' (see note 7) is exaggerated and unconvincing, if not downright dangerous. The Department of Health articulation of strengthening the role of civil society *alongside* more *effective* government is more credible. But to do this, government and local statutory agencies must be clear about when they are commissioning public services, retaining responsibility for ensuring that standards are met; and when they are supporting communities and people in their own public spirited activities, thereby relieving pressure on public services. Since social enterprises quite reasonably seek full cost recovery for delivering services on behalf of the state, greater economy lies in relieving pressure on services by supporting genuine community-driven activities, which more than match the cost of government support through their own voluntary effort. Both for social and economic reasons the first responsibility of big society must be a strong policy to support community activity in its own right. Diversifying providers and encouraging social enterprises only makes sense as supplementary to this.

6. Managing the threshold

For increasing empowerment, the crucial factor is not whether a public service is run by a public agency or a voluntary body. The crucial factor is whether people have the best conditions to do the things for themselves and each other that are best done directly as a community whilst also holding to account the providers of collective public services no matter what sector those may be in.

Understanding this depends on understanding the different roles and economic structure of different kinds of third sector organisation. The key differences are not between the public sector and the third sector. They run right through the third sector. Some of the sector, mainly social enterprises and other professionally staffed voluntary organisations which take on state contracts, are in practice clients of the state; others, mainly community groups consisting wholly or almost wholly of members and volunteers, are the instrument and voice of communities. A small stratum successfully carry out both roles by keeping them separate. There must be different but equally strong policies for these two elements in the third sector. As we show below, the community groups are by far the majority of the sector but current policy makes them look residual.

Social enterprise businesses and professional charities are fundamentally different animals from citizen-led community groups. Individual organisations can sometimes carry out both roles but in order to understand the balance they have to strike we must first understand the distinct role of each function. Both functions are important but it is only community-led groups that actually strengthen communities, because they consist of community members, not provide formal services for them. Lumping together the whole of civil society as if it is one entity obscures the question of whether

communities are actually getting stronger. You could increase by 500% the delivery of public services by social enterprises and still leave the community weak and overdependent on services.

Professional charities and social enterprises provide services in ways that are not necessarily very different from the way that public or private sector agencies do, especially when they are delivering to public service contracts. Many charities and voluntary organisations have a good reputation and track record. Their expertise and empathy makes them good service deliverers but it does not mean that they *are* the community in the way that community groups are. They are mainly professionally staffed. Where they also use volunteers (not all do) they use them in a directed role in much the same way as volunteers are used in publicly run hospitals and schools.

Community groups, on the other hand, *consist* of volunteers and members. This means not just that there are a lot of volunteers in them but that the members, *as* volunteers, are in control. It is an entirely different ethos. Volunteers in professional charities are directed labour. Volunteers in community groups are the decision makers *and* labour. This is a different world, based on reciprocity, not contracts.

This is not because community groups are exceptionally high-minded. Their ethos arises naturally from the fact that they spring from the daily life of households, friends, neighbours and acquaintances. Their general climate of fairness and cooperation springs from the fact that as they are run genuinely voluntarily, no-one can make anyone else do something they don't want to do. This tends to make people nice to each other! But it does not and need not produce systematic services. That is the inalienable role of agencies accountable to the whole public body.

Once we have got clear the primacy of community groups for empowerment we need to look at the question of how, as a supplementary factor, social enterprises can be used to the greatest benefit of communities. There is no watertight definition of a social enterprise. In effect every community group that starts trading in some way has put its toe in the social enterprise water. This is a natural progression for groups which acquire or manage material assets above a certain level. A typical example would be groups which acquire the use of a community centre. Running costs have to be met, a caretaker or office manager may be needed, and the premises can yield at least part of its own costs by being hired out to groups which have no premises of their own (by far the majority). Possibly a bar or cafe will be run to attract more users and cover more costs. This is the point at which a group that was wholly voluntary may find itself taking on paid staff and having to have a business plan.

This is an exciting but challenging time for a community group. Will it lose its voluntary ethos? Will it become simply an instrument of a funding agency? Will it become a prisoner of its own success, having to earn more and more to keep the amenity afloat and staff paid? The primary concern of big society strategy towards groups in this position should not be to get them to take on more and

more business but with how, while managing their new commitments, they can keep and enhance their community basis.

Once there is a policy for authorities to proactively devolve as much of their business as possible to ‘the community’ a whole new level of challenges comes into view. In an open market for piecing out public services the cards are stacked against the genuinely locally-evolved community group. There are already much more experienced social enterprises in the field (to say nothing of private enterprises) who do not have this community basis but who will naturally look for these opportunities. Authorities which want to ensure that their commissioning of social enterprises yields maximum benefit in terms of strengthening home grown community groups need to shape their commissioning process specifically to ensure this. Contrary to the assumptions of some authorities, there are a number of legitimate steps that can be taken to ensure more local community benefit. A detailed guide commissioned by Social Enterprise East Midlands¹² explains the legal framework and shows how this can be done. Even where contracts do go to non-local businesses, community engagement and benefit to local community groups should be written into the service being commissioned, not assumed to be an automatic attribute of social enterprises.

7. Community groups are the bulk of the sector

Community groups are by far the majority of organisations in the sector. Even taking account of the fact that most are small, most volunteering is generated by community groups. The National Survey of Third Sector Organisations (www.nstso.com) does not distinguish community groups from other types of organisation but the pattern can clearly be seen by comparing its findings for organisations with two or fewer staff members (characteristic of most community groups) with those for organisations with more than two staff or an income above £25,000 a year (more characteristic of professionally-run charities and social enterprises, though may also include some larger community groups).

Comparison of survey respondents shows (figure two) that 56% have no staff and a further 14% have two or fewer staff. So 70% in all have two or fewer staff. To these must be added the fact that, as the survey acknowledged, there are also many thousands of other community groups ‘below the radar’ of formal survey methods precisely because they do not appear on official lists, and therefore almost certainly have no staff. Community groups are therefore a large majority of all third sector organisations - as the user lists of virtually any local third sector umbrella organisation will show.

Cross-relating staff levels with levels of volunteers (figure three) shows that organisations with two or fewer staff, or none (ie community groups), have as many volunteers as organisations with three or more staff.

¹² Anthony Collins Solicitors, *Social Enterprise and the Public Sector*, BEST Procurement Development Partnership and SEEM, Nov 2010
www.equalworks.co.uk/resources/contentfiles/3244.pdf

Ignoring the fundamental difference between community groups and social enterprises (or professionally-run voluntary organisations) allows the big society policy to seem as though it is mainly about empowerment. In fact the empowerment component is the weakest part of it. Building up community enterprises to strengthen the small business sector and the local economy and diversify service providers is justification enough, and should not masquerade as empowering communities. Still less should community groups be encouraged indiscriminately to try to turn themselves into social enterprises. Some may want to take on a social enterprise arm *to support their primary function of strengthening community life*. This does not change the limited nature of social enterprise activity itself. In a policy which lumps them together, the distinctive role of community organisations is masked and receives little support.

Figure two: locating community groups within the third sector

LOCATING COMMUNITY GROUPS WITHIN THE THIRD SECTOR SURVEY	
EMPLOYEES (Q30)	
	56% of organisations have no (full time equivalent) employees
	8% have one
	6% have two
	9% have three to five
	6% have six to ten

INCOME (Q33)	
86% of respondents stated the overall annual income of their organisation. Of these:	
	5% of respondent organisations have no income
	9% have between £1,000 and £2,000 a year
	9% have between £2,000 and £5,000
	13% have between £5,000 and £10,000
	13% have between £10,000 and £25,000
	9% have between £25,000 and £50,000
	8% have between £50,000 and £100,000
	13% have between £100,000 and £500,000
	7% have over £500,000
Thus 58% were below £25,000 a year and 42% above. 12% of those below said they	

Figure three: levels of volunteering in community groups and professionally-run third sector organisations

Cross tab Q 31 Total No. volunteers and Q 30 No. FTE employees Per cent responses (omitting no reply)									
		FTE Employees							
		←							⇒
Volunteers ↓	Over-all	None	One	Two	3-5	7-10	11-30	31-100	101 plus
None	7	6	6	8	8	7	10	9	14
1-10	43	48	44	43	41	37	29	24	12
11-20	25	25	28	28	25	26	27	26	26
21-30	8	8	8	8	9	9	10	9	9
31-50	6	6	7	6	8	8	8	9	10
51-100	4	4	4	4	6	6	7	7	7
101-500	3	2	2	2	3	5	7	11	11
501 plus	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	3	8

8. Empowerment requires a policy specifically about the primary role of community groups

In order to restore empowerment to the centre of the frame it is necessary to consider how government can create the conditions for community groups not merely to survive but to flourish and expand their horizons and capabilities whilst retaining their essential nature as mutual aid and community voice organisations. This means looking afresh at the various forms of support which are known to have this effect: primarily community development, including assisting in negotiating the availability of free or cheap meeting spaces; grants which support groups' own objectives, with light touch accountability; learning about citizenship; local organisational networks for cooperation; getting their voice heard by decision-makers; and holding public services to account¹³.

One of the main vehicles for providing these supportive features is local voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations, so it is good that these are the subject of the OCS consultation (see note 5). The consultation uses figures from the national survey of third sector organisations to show that only 18% of organisations in the sector access the help of the local umbrella groups (or 'infrastructure organisations') but that those that do so gain a good deal of support and benefit from this.

It is regrettable that the big society strategy does not disseminate and make use of the much fuller information in the survey that we have cited above, showing the different positions of the mass of community groups and the professionally-run third sector organisations. Presenting this picture clearly would provide a more solid basis for policy.

Clearly it would be advantageous if a much larger proportion of the sector could access the help of the infrastructure bodies. Making this link would be one of the functions of new community development strategy. But this would also require changes in the funding and running of the infrastructure bodies themselves. Many are themselves quite small organisations and it is not surprising that they would not be able to reach the majority of the sector. Some have already suffered drastically from recent local authority cuts. Funding and development for them would need to be substantially improved if they were to widen their horizons, or in some cases even survive. But equally important, both they and their funders would need to see clearly that there are different needs to be met for the mass of community groups and for social enterprises. If a widened agenda simply reproduces the muddling of community strengthening with encouraging bids to take over public services, once again the objective of stronger communities will be confounded.

Learning, networks and development assistance for community groups might be helped by community organisers, where and when they are available. At

¹³ Established in a national inquiry published as *Firm Foundations*, Home Office and Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004

a possible but by no means certain rate of 1000 such organisers coming on stream per year, the great majority of neighbourhoods will be waiting a long time for this sort of help - unless it is provided by community development workers who already exist. In 2006 there were an estimated 15,000 of these in England. Many will have disappeared with the demise of Neighbourhood Renewal in 2008, and others will have been made redundant or are currently at risk. Even supposing their number halved since 2006, any serious strategy to support community activity must bring them into the picture and look for ways to re-establish this kind of resource and reabsorb the experience that is currently draining away. Equally there will be many front-line workers in other professions who will have some experience of using community development methods who could play a larger role if given a proper remit for this by their employing agencies¹⁴.

But it is not merely because such workers happen to exist that big society strategy needs to look to community development. It is because community development has been doing big society work for decades before big society acquired its name. There may be differences, reforms are needed, rethinking is in order, and we outline plans for this in detail below. At the same time there is a wealth of experience and expertise to be drawn on and reconfigured.

9. 'Weaning the third sector off state support'?

Big society's emphasis on promoting social enterprises is presented as a means of weaning third sector organisations off state grants. In big society narrative, an indictment is levelled at New Labour that during its period of office communities were weakened by community activity being made dependent on state resources and direction. The logic of this indictment needs unpacking not in order to defend a party record but to get a true picture of the relationship between the third sector and government.

In a way not fundamentally different from the big society narrative, New Labour was often hazy, particularly in its later years, about the difference between community groups, professionally-led charities and social enterprises. Once the Office for the Third Sector had been established in the middle of the New Labour period, the fact that an organisation was part of the third sector was generally taken to be sufficient indication that simply by existing it was strengthening community life.

As we have illustrated, the National Survey of Third Sector Organisations¹⁵ shows that, despite some creative and worthwhile schemes, the great majority of local community groups still got no financial support from public bodies. Most central and local government support went to professional charities and social enterprises. Whilst a part of the funding was earmarked to support the smaller local community groups, the support only reached a

¹⁴ See *Empowerment Skills for All*, HCA, 2009, www.pacesempowerment.co.uk

¹⁵ See notes 6 and 7 and *Thriving Third Sector*, www.pacesempowerment.co.uk/publications

fairly small proportion of them. Most survive almost entirely on their own labour. There is no record of those that go under or of the level of success of attempts to set new groups up.

The main New Labour scheme for supporting community groups in England, Grassroots Grants, provided about £130m over three years, about £43m a year. Estimating the number of community groups in England conservatively at 250,000, and given an average Grassroots grant of about £2,500, the scheme may have been reaching about 7% of all such groups. The Coalition government's 'Community First' programme is in effect a continuation of this on a similar scale.

A policy to ensure that at least, say, 50% of community groups could access small grants would revolutionise the sector for about £300m pa - around 0.3% of the health budget. The health budget would in fact be an appropriate place to take it from: a substantial and global literature on the health benefits of community activity, of which the Marmot report is only one of the best known, suggests that this would pay for itself in terms of health alone many times over¹⁶. Indeed, the facts and figures in the 2010 White Paper on public health¹⁷ suggest that the health budget never can be brought into balance without a major shift of investment towards community activity. But here too the understanding of community activity is weakened by some of the more muddled big society rhetoric.

The Coalition government attributes what it perceives as an enervated local society to the third sector having become clients of an overblown state under New Labour. To the extent that there is some truth in this, it is most true of those organisations which, as social enterprises, have taken over state contracts, and least true of community groups, which depend almost entirely on their own independent effort. Yet big society policy seems bent on pressing as many community groups as possible to go down the social enterprise route, and has little explicit policy to support community groups in their distinct and fundamental community-strengthening function.

The benefit for public services of boosting community activity is not that a state service has been taken over but that the burgeoning of community activity *relieves pressure* on the state services in dozens of ways - by generating better health, less depression, less isolation, better circulation of information and informal learning, better personal skills, more employability, more mutual aid, more purposeful activities and better role models for young people.

Groups or organisations which, on the other hand, take over a statutory service quite reasonably seek full cost recovery because they rightly have to meet public service standards and objectives. They are accountable to the public through a commissioning body. The service may be delivered best by

¹⁶ See David Hunter et al, *The Public Health System in England*, Policy Press, 2010

¹⁷ HM Government, *Healthy Lives, Healthy People*, White Paper on public health, November 2010

these organisations but there is no basic saving to the public purse - unless the contract is deliberately under-resourced. And there is no inherent big society gain in terms of empowerment, unless such a gain has been specified as part of the service to be delivered.

10. Community organisers and community developers

Most of the big society narrative pointedly ignores community development. Considering that the community organiser role is practically indistinguishable from the community development role, and that it will take years for many community organisers to come on stream whilst even with recent losses there is still a significant establishment of community development workers, this appears to be either poor planning or an implicit rejection of the discipline. There is no explicit big society analysis of why community development would not fulfil big society aims but the implication of the debate may be that as community development was relatively favoured under New Labour, it constituted part of the overblown public services and reduced community groups to being clients of an over-directive state.

Some of the big society proponents however cite inspiration from Saul Alinsky, the radical theorist and community activist who developed the idea of community organising in Chicago in the 1950 and 60's, and from the Brazilian liberation theologian Paulo Freire, who developed an influential theory about the role of learning as a means for poor people to self-organise and overcome their oppression¹⁸. These leftwing thinkers and activists were influential in the formation of community development in the UK in the 1960s. A commentator in the Daily Telegraph recognised this, albeit in caricature: 'David Cameron's big society is a grotesque fantasy inspired by leftist subversive Saul Alinsky'¹⁹.

A key feature of the writings of both Alinsky and Freire was the notion that community organisations and community organisers must remain separate and independent from the state. Equally the separation of state and community is supposedly one of the ideas behind the big society, though hugely contradicted by the emphasis on getting communities to take over state services. So at first sight the invocation of Alinsky and Freire to underpin the work of the 5000 community organisers makes some kind of sense. But it is a strange throwback, ignoring the way that the movement they inspired in Britain has, over half a century, come to terms with its integral role within democratic societies, as monitors and complementers, not providers, of state services.

¹⁸ 'The oppressors do not favour promoting the community as a whole, but rather selected leaders...Through praxis (learning through action) oppressed people can acquire a critical awareness of their own condition and, with their allies, struggle for liberation'. P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

¹⁹ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/geraldwarner/100032381/20.11.2010>

Contrary to some of the assumptions in big society discourse, New Labour never espoused community development systematically or on a large scale. It supported a number of CD schemes and organisations but there was an uneasy accommodation with CD because CD insisted on the primacy of community strengthening over the absorption of community activity into prescribed policy agendas. Most state-funded CD jobs were not created directly by government but lower down the policy cascade by a number of local authorities and by the managers of regeneration schemes.

CD jobs were created not because government prescribed them but because local managers knew that local involvement could not be achieved without them. What we did see, in some areas, was an increasingly sophisticated approach whereby CD became involved at a strategic level in public authorities as well as maintaining its traditional areas of work within neighbourhoods. The strategic work consisted in supporting and encouraging the development of a greater level of accountability of services to communities and a greater democratisation of the overall planning and decision making process. This mature CD approach was pursued by individual local authorities but not properly explored by New Labour or articulated by the leading CD organisations.

This emerging process was the culmination of developments that have been taking place over the past 30 years. Starting under the Tories with City Challenge and the Single Regeneration Budget, and continuing more systematically under New Labour with Local Strategic Partnerships, Local Area Agreements and Neighbourhood Renewal, governments have gradually been learning how to rebalance public services and resident input²⁰. After a number of false starts, New Labour had just about formulated this into a viable universal system by 2008. But the combination of vision and discipline that this required apparently could not withstand the change of Labour leadership, the recession and the MPs' expenses scandal.

New Labour in effect lost the plot on its own visionary local authority reforms in 2008²¹. The main programmes using CD were largely dropped, and many CD jobs disappeared with them. In retrospect it can be seen that it was the Blair-Prescott-Blunkett and latterly Blears axis which had provided the platform for those reforms, and once these figures had left the front of stage the vision evaporated. The election of 2010 proved to be the decisive break. In 1997 New Labour had set out the vision that "In twenty years' time no-one will be disadvantaged by where they live". The stream of policy to bring this about was in fact remarkably well sustained, despite the many other twists and turns in the New Labour story, for ten years. But it was deafeningly absent from the party's 2010 election manifesto. Nor indeed was there anything similar in the Libdem manifesto, even though the

²⁰ Gabriel Chanan, *Searching For Solid Foundations*, London: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2003

²¹ See John Houghton, *A Job Half Done and Half Abandoned: New Labour's National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, 1999-2009*, www.metropolitanlines.co.uk, 2010

Liberal Democrats had often been pioneers of local participation in Councils where they had control.

11. Alternative futures for community development

So the big society theme had little competition at the start of the Coalition administration. The great danger is that it means reinventing the wheel - at the pre-pneumatic stage. The great opportunity is to stop pretending that this is a new agenda, link up with the best of the precedents, and pick up the threads of the best community development experience, in particular the ways in which it has been reforming itself over the past ten years to be more strategic, more outcome oriented and less adversarial towards a democratic state.

However, this is not simple. Community development is not a unitary, standardised practice. Ironically, a crucial dichotomy stems not so much from adversity as from the dilemma posed by early New Labour's favourable openings towards the movement. Some CD champions regarded distrust of the state as a fundamental tenet, and sought to institutionalise the 'purity' of the Alinsky and Freire approaches²². Part of this mindset was to see fieldwork practitioners and activists as the sole authentic source of community development explanation. This resulted in a set of national occupational standards which largely eschewed any key role for management, unified strategy across local authorities, working inside public agencies, use of objective measurement or planning by specific outcomes and timeframes. All these institutional instruments were regarded as anathema to the essential fluidity and community-based nature of the practice, rather than as instruments which needed to be mastered precisely in order to create a society in which community development was integral to the governing ethos and changes it. CD was invariably said to be a long term process but there was no long term plan. We would characterise this approach as **static** community development. Ironically it is the static model of CD that the big society is picking up on.

The alternative approach, which we frankly espouse, seeks to make good precisely those deficiencies we perceive in the static model. We hold, with John Abbott²³, that the scope for community development in any particular time and place depends on the extent to which a government recognises in practice, irrespective of surface ideology, that certain things can only be achieved by fostering greater autonomous activity and participation on the part of the population - not instead of good government but both to complement it and to hold it to account for its proper role. Abbott's graphic examples concern the way that governments in southern countries have had

²² See Ledwith, M. (2005) *Community Development: a Critical Approach*. Bristol: Policy Press

²³ John Abbot, *Sharing The City, Community Participation in Urban Management*. London: Earthscan, 1996. Reviewed and discussed in Gabriel Chanan, 'In and not wholly against the state' in *Working for Change: Irish Journal of Community Work*, 1, July 2009; and in www.pacesempowerment.co.uk/publications

to accommodate to the self organisation of the huge shantytowns accreting around the big cities, including their power to negotiate with governments for provision of physical and economic infrastructure.

New Labour recognised this necessity regarding regeneration, overcoming poverty and the reform of public services. This half-opened the door to a hugely enhanced role for community development. In a number of major local authorities new and sophisticated CD strategies began to be formulated. But these remained largely unknown outside their patch, whilst the audible national CD voices mostly clung to the static model and to distrust of government both central and local. Only towards the end of the New Labour period did an alternative gestalt begin to crystallise, illustrated for example by *The Community Development Challenge*²⁴, the incorporation of community indicators into the national indicator system and recognition of the extent to which community development had become an aspect of many other front-line professions²⁵.

Underlying the optional futures for community development is the question of how society all over the globe will be managed through the 21st century. It is unimaginable that we will survive and make good the challenges of global inequality and the wars that spring from it, climate change and the social pressures that spring from that, longevity and the health challenges that spring from that, the clash of traditions and the debate between faith and science without a massive upgrading of the quality of public participation, an unleashing of creativity, joint problem-solving, compassion, cooperation and reciprocity amongst the ordinary peoples of the world. These challenges are way beyond the capability of governments to manage on their own - but they also need bold government management and fair and efficient distribution of limited resources that can only work with wide, well-informed debate and democratic assent.

Moving into this mode is also a psychological and theoretical challenge for many community development champions whose position was fashioned by the marginality of the occupation throughout most of its career in the second half of the twentieth century. CD was formed largely in a climate of protest, and squirreled resources mostly from 'afterthought' corners of policy. Both Conservative and Labour governments since the second world war have opened up tentative avenues of cooperation with community development but until New Labour there had been no full-frontal attempt to institute its principles through mainstream public services. These attempts - the obligation of all major public services to engage with the community, the duty to involve, the duty to promote democracy, the attempt to 'put the community in the driving seat' in regeneration programmes and for it to have an equal seat at the table in local strategic partnerships - all drew on the community development ethos.

²⁴ Department of Communities, 2006; also available on www.pacesempowerment.co.uk/publications

²⁵ See *Empowerment Skills for All*, Leeds: HCA. 2009 and www.pacesempowerment.co.uk/publications

Yet there was little direct involvement of experienced community development champions. Why was this? Partly because the CD champions had little experience of framing policy at this level. The models for action and the great majority of experience was in scatterings of small scale projects. And partly because some weren't even sure they wanted to try - they felt that taking a positive role in state planning would sully the authenticity of 'being on the side of the community'.

Community development as a movement and an occupation needs to make the transition that it often helps local groups to make - from anger to dialogue, from protest to negotiation, from guerrilla gains to playing a leading part at the decision-making table. Of course, if democracy fails, if governments revert to tyranny, people are forced back on outright resistance and there is no room for community development. But so long as the door is open to significant influence, the responsibility of community development is to think bigger and equip itself to play a collegiate part in macro social planning.

12. The underdeveloped big idea in big society

Beneath the rhetoric the scope for the big society can be described in just the same way. David Cameron's big society vision is in effect an attempt to answer the John Abbott question: what does this government need that it can't achieve without the active participation of the population? His persistence with big society despite scepticism in many reaches of his own party and the media, and the paradoxes involved in working out how to stimulate a popular movement from above, suggests not merely a convenient diversion from the effect of cuts but a genuine appreciation of the reality of what government cannot do and only people can do for themselves.

Yet within eight months of election victory, the state control element bids fair to squeeze the empowerment factor into a marginal role which cannot possibly, on this scale, alleviate major social problems. The battle for the essence of big society is not between the government and opposition or any other grouping but within the kernel of the notion itself, in the minds of Ministers and civil servants and within the third sector itself, which often fudges the question of whether it really wants citizen action or just wants contracts to deliver services. If the heart of the matter is people doing more for themselves, taking more control over their lives, and taking more control over the way public services are delivered to them, this objective is often as confused and concealed within the overall third sector profile as in government.

The genuinely economical alternative is to create optimum conditions for communities to build up their own activities under their own initiative and control. Some of these activities will indeed be services, and some will be campaigns to discipline services delivered by others. None will be

systematic or expected to be so, and the state will retain responsibility to maintain the systematic overview and ensure all public service gaps are filled. But the energy released by these activities, by a genuinely autonomous big society movement, will relieve a great deal of pressure on the systematic services, especially in health, education, care and safety. This requires more than a handful of small grants and a sprinkling of community organisers. It requires a national strategy for reformed community development.

The big society and community development need each other but both also need reforming. Big society needs to put empowerment in position as the central aim, command significant investment, develop proper criteria of community strengths and use the best of community development methods to achieve these. Community development in turn needs to overcome its antipathy to strategic planning, specifying outcomes and collecting objective evidence. A reforming agenda for CD along these lines began to be explored in the 2000s²⁶ and needs to be revived, continued and expanded.

13. The community development treasure chest

Despite its own forms of confusion (we unpack these below) the community development tradition is much clearer than the big society on what is really needed to build more effective community life. Community development offers understanding of:

what community groups are, how they come about, how they work, and how they are different from professional charities and social enterprises

how to mobilise community involvement across a neighbourhood

how to build the confidence of people enduring multiple disadvantage so that they can change their conditions

how to show people that their aspirations are shared with others in their locality and can be achieved far better through cooperation than conflict

how to help people who are angry about repeatedly being let down by public services in the past to move from hopelessness or anger to influence and negotiation

how to enable community groups who can be exclusive and inward turning to open up to diversity and make alliances across ethnic or cultural boundaries

²⁶ Notably with *Firm Foundations*, Home Office, 2004, which laid down what conditions were necessary for local community groups to flourish, and *The Community Development Challenge*, CLG 2006, which set out issues that would need to be addressed to make CD more effective.

how to get public service staff and managers who are stuck in silo thinking to unblock and respond to community initiative

how to ensure that public agencies which have effectively abandoned disadvantaged areas because they do not know how to overcome problems enter into partnership with local residents to generate creative joint solutions.

Not all community development achieves these objectives but there are clear examples which do, both recent and older²⁷.

HELP, the Health Empowerment Leverage Project, uses the term **transformative** community development to indicate CD methods which transform a neighbourhood from a spiral of decline to a spiral of achievement. What would it take to convert average or 'static' CD to 'transformative' CD? To answer this we must examine some of the obstacles that have held this discipline back.

14. Reconfiguring community development

Even before the current cuts, which are decimating the profession, CD was in some disarray. The causes of the disarray were a mixture of success and failure: success in that some CD ideas had been taken up widely over the past twenty years as part of the methods of many other occupations such as housing, policing, planning and regeneration, and had influenced such policies as community engagement, neighbourhood renewal and the duty to involve. Failure in that this diffusion sometimes became dilution, and the CD community on the whole did not use this period of credibility and resources to work out how to turn this spread of its ideas into a new level of strategy. CD has struggled to adapt from a culture of small-scale, freestanding marginal projects to being part of large regeneration systems such as the Single Regeneration Budget (under the previous Conservative administration) and Neighbourhood Renewal (under New Labour).

The Appendix to this paper crystallises 15 points which distinguish transformative community development from static community development.

Curiously it is static CD which over the last generation has captured much of the national dialogue in this field whilst transformative CD has quietly got on with the job. The result is that the weaker form is what is embodied in the relatively high profile areas such as the National Occupational Standards

²⁷ See for example www.healthempowermentgroup.org.uk, 2010; Dick Atkinson, *Civil Renewal, Mending the Hole in the Social Ozone Layer*, Brewin Books, 2004; Jim Diers, *Neighbor Power, Building Community the Seattle Way*, University of Washington Press, 2004.

for CD, guidance from national CD organisations to public agencies, and many CD case studies and training courses. Transformative CD is found more often in the design of public agency CD programmes, where they exist, because agencies which fund them require concrete action plans and outcomes.

Static CD is essentially utopian, seeing the state and all its apparatus as fatally flawed, and posing itself as the only source of the right values to build a new society. But this 'best' is in practice the enemy of the 'better', as it fails to project any specific path of improvement. Static CD practitioners, seeing themselves as 'undermining' the established order, feel inauthentic in seeking payment. They are in a psychologically weak negotiating position, as if having to pretend to be offering to strengthen the established system whilst nurturing a hidden agenda to destroy it. This ends up, ironically, with a weak critique of policy.

Transformative CD sees positive aspects of the existing state as the heritage of previous waves of popular reform - health service, education, welfare, environment - the social wage; and therefore takes a collegiate attitude to these agencies and their staff. Whilst recognising that they have problems of bureaucracy, it sees an underlying commonality of progressive values in a long historical framework and asks: *what's missing, what's not working and what form of transaction is needed to knit together the two worlds of the state and the community?* - and defines CD as being the function which fills that gap

This furnishes a position, an identity, and an offer from which to negotiate with public agencies. The transformative CD practitioner therefore feels in an authentic position in relation to other agencies.

When new policies and projects are looking for 'official' guidance they often gravitate to the most visible sources and reproduce their weaknesses. Once they get going on the ground, reality, goodwill and common sense often improve them, but they lack the benefit of a rationale, theory and evidence and are in a weak position to defend themselves when threatened, or to intervene proactively in policy making. This contributes to the long-running pattern of good projects being marginalised or dropped and the work often having to start again a few years later on an equally weak theoretical basis.

These conflicting tendencies in CD have striven with each other, often unconsciously because of lack of analysis, over the last generation, at the same time being buffeted one way or another by national policies which used and abused their ideas and experiences in an ad hoc way but hardly ever engaged in a full-frontal dialogue with them.

15. Reconfiguring big society

There is some tension inherent in the idea of government planning and applying criteria to voluntary activity but it is a tension which can be managed. The essential thing is that there should be clarity that what government is supporting is independent community action, and that the support should be at arm's length, applying transparent criteria only to ensure that supported activity is not antagonistic to the public interest or to individual or collective rights and freedom and that it does build social capital and community strengths.

The big society policy paper published in October 2010 (see note 5) recognises that the general cuts are making life difficult for the voluntary and community sector. This is a helpful admission but we are not persuaded by the argument that 'the sector cannot be immune from reductions in public expenditure because the scale of the challenges to reducing the deficit is so great'. Not everything was equally cut. Health, education and overseas aid were 'protected' and in certain ways increased. It would have cost a tiny fraction of those expenditures to do the same for the VCS, and would have made eminent sense since the expansion in big society is supposed to counterbalance some of the effects of cuts elsewhere.

In terms of gaining credibility and practitioner backing for big society this was a missed opportunity. Whilst public services are being cut, a fraction of the savings should be reinvested to strengthen the ability of the main part of the third sector, the local community groups, to help cope with the inevitable extra strains. This would make sense of the injunction to public services to involve local people more in their decision-making and service delivery, which otherwise seem like added aggravations when resources are diminishing on both sides.

Imagine how differently such an increase would come across from the present gloom. It would hugely energise the voluntary and community sector instead of plunging it into survival mode, help public service bureaucracies to rethink their strategies, and reverberate around the world as a genuinely radical move to rebalance power and control between governments and peoples.

This should be accompanied by a strategy with real, verifiable objectives. These should be in terms of whether there are sufficient local groups to offer plenty of opportunities and support for volunteering, mutual aid and social networking; whether community groups are having sufficient dialogue and collaboration with public services; whether people feel they can influence what is going on in their locality; whether there are effective neighbourhood partnerships bringing people and agencies together around an agenda of joint improvement; whether vulnerable and disadvantaged people are being included in the action.

There have been four misconceptions in the big society approach which need to be changed:

(i) **The misconception of novelty.** By making out that Big Society is a new phenomenon, its development is allowed to run alongside cutting support to existing voluntary and community organisations, weakening the basis for growth. This is happening both directly - for example the Office for Civil Society's own cuts in grants to its 'voice' organisations - and on a much larger scale indirectly, by failing to protect community organisations from the knock-on effect of cuts to local authorities - an interesting case of a policy being cut at the same time as being launched (is this a first?).

The Coalition's judgement that New Labour was too controlling of society is sweepingly equated with *society itself* having been passive, as if there was no self-governing 'big society' or its equivalent before 2010, whereas of course this was a large, longstanding and varied area of national life.

There does appear to be growth of activity here and there but as there is no overall monitoring of old and new it is impossible to say whether community action has really increased or decreased under the big society banner, but it seems likely that it has decreased. Much of what appears to be new consists in local bodies rebranding previous activity as big society, in an attempt to maintain credibility with the new regime. Consequently Beneath this voluntary amnesia lay the second illusion:

(ii) **The 'see-saw' misconception:** the BS narrative has encouraged the idea that public services can be delivered by citizen action instead of by public agencies, rather than by cooperation between the two. In reality much citizen action, especially in the disadvantaged areas where it is most needed, depends also on conditions and support by public agencies in the form of community development, affordable places to meet and operate, small grants, and information and advice from public service staff²⁸. Britain is rich in voluntary and community activity precisely because of this long mutual acclimatisation of the two sectors. There were also some important advances made in the New Labour period which no serious analysis of this area can afford to ignore. Where local authorities and their public sector partners withdraw this infrastructure, citizen action often fails to get beyond a rudimentary level. It is good to see that OCS policy is concerned with the role of infrastructure bodies. It would be even better if government also urged local authorities to protect and improve these so far as possible as a priority in its enforced retrenchment.

The government has an opportunity to make a historic shift towards a more sustainable and democratic society if it would remodel big society on the ideas of coproduction between state and citizens instead of posing citizen action as an *alternative* to state action. In reality this is what the canniest local authorities and third sector organisations are doing but they are having to do it against the grain of the BS rhetoric.

²⁸ *Firm Foundations*, Home Office, 2004

(iii) **The empowerment misconception.** Government is promising through the Big society theme to ‘give power to people and communities’. This generous offer overlooks the fact that government only has power in the first place because people have invested power in government itself to do things which people want done collectively. The things we want done collectively are mostly those that need to be done *systematically and fairly across society*. These are the things that cannot be done by spasmodic citizen action. What people and communities do for themselves, vital though it is, is not systematic. We have delegated that power to central authority, and hold them accountable to use it well. The third sector excels at plugging gaps left by policy systems, and could reduce pressure on those systems by doing more off its own bat but cannot substitute for those systems themselves.

What we do in community groups is not and does not claim to be systematic: we do it where and when we are motivated, and we work ‘from the inside out’ - from a group of friends and neighbours not from a statistical overview of the local population. Community activity inevitably leaves people out, even if it is passionate about the people whom it does include. That’s why we delegate to public authorities the job of making sure that everyone gets not only the services they are entitled to but support for community activity to reach all corners of the population. This takes practical organisation and staff with specific skills. If empowerment has a meaning it must be that people come to feel they have greater control over their lives and conditions. Having the ‘power’ to ‘bid to take over failing public services’ is not empowerment. Apart from the wrenching distortion of language, what about the empowerment of people who do not want to take over a failing service but want to hold the agency responsible for it to account and make them deliver it properly, whatever sector that agency may be in?

(iv) **The equation of community organisations with ‘the community’.** The BS narrative is in a long tradition in regularly repeating the unanalytical use of ‘community’ to sound as if it means the whole local population, where in practice it means a specific community group or organisation. Community groups and organisations are accountable only to their own members, usually a tiny fraction of the local population. A neighbourhood might contain 5000 people. Its biggest community group might have 200 members and of those only 20 who really run it. Handing over a public service to them can in some circumstances be a creative solution. But it also raises major questions of accountability. Local authority community centres handed over to ‘the community’ have sometimes become the preserve of a small clique and no-go areas for everyone else.

Poor expression of community development theory and practice bears some responsibility for encouraging this loose language. Community development dialogue has tended to encourage practitioners to designate the group they are working with as ‘the community’ whereas it may consist of only a tiny fraction of the neighbourhood population or even be unknown to most of it. Sometimes this is reasonable use of shorthand but mostly it obscures the

question of the relationship between the group and the rest of the population. Sometimes this doesn't matter. Few groups make claims about representing anyone other than their own members. In other cases groups which do claim to represent the community on a particular issue take the trouble to check and demonstrate whether they have the credibility and backing from the majority of local residents.

When this kind of language is adopted uncritically into policy it can become seriously misleading, and obscure key questions about how it is to be run after it has been 'taken over by the community'. Does the whole community have access to it? Who is accountable to whom for ensuring its quality? What is to happen to it if the organisation is no better at running it than the authority was - or worse? Is there involvement by members of the community other than those few who 'took it over'? What standards are to be applied to it and who is to apply them? The public authority which commissions the service must remain accountable for standards and for remedies when things go wrong.

16. Conclusion: a new synthesis

So what should be done? The crucial conceptual change required is to recognise that big society doesn't spring automatically from small government but from a way of managing society that encourages maximum cooperation and mutual strengthening between people's own actions and public services. Government has an essential role in steering and supporting this process.

Instead of propagating the idea that people should *take over* public services, policy needs to focus on the fact that society is run by local people and public services *together*. Every public service is *already* a balancing act between state provision and community participation. Every service needs both types of input. Change requires *rebalancing*, not substitution.

Exceptional individuals will help their neighbours no matter what, but for volunteering and community activity to be established as social norms requires favourable local conditions: cheap and convenient meeting spaces for community groups; networks between groups which transmit skills and information and build up collaborative effort; public services that listen and respond; neighbourhood partnership coordinators and community development workers; grants with light-touch accountability for groups who tackle disadvantages; fair access to contracts; local councillors who bring their constituents' ideas to the decision-making table.

Disadvantage is always clustered in some neighbourhoods more than others. This does not mean that disadvantage is only found in those neighbourhoods. It is also spread more thinly across well off neighbourhoods. Redistribution therefore always needs both individual mechanisms such as benefits and localised ones such as neighbourhood improvement.

If there is no overall big society plan or map then there is no targeting by localities or neighbourhoods. Yet better off neighbourhoods are far better able to generate volunteering and voluntary organisations than are poorly off neighbourhoods. Poorer neighbourhoods have poorer health, worse crime and poorer education than well off ones, so more big society is needed here. But without some degree of prioritised support, the results of big society will shadow, not modify, existing disadvantages.

We agree that it is not government's job to create or control community activity. That would be a contradiction in terms. But we believe it *is* government's job to create the right conditions for people to strengthen themselves as communities. Most people did not create their own localities. A local population is not automatically a community. Many people live where they do because they have been put there by housing departments or large industries, or in order to be within reach of a certain job, or because it is all they can afford. Most people in most places in Britain have not fundamentally shaped their locality but have taken it as found and put up with it as best they could. Many take little part in their locality and intend to leave it when other reasons expire. In addition, many people are pinned inside their houses for much of the time by care responsibilities or fear of going out at night.

The decisions that shaped their localities were mostly taken by authorities and industries, and to some extent by erstwhile residents and community groups, whose role is rarely acknowledged. If we think it is healthy for people to take a more active interest in their locality and more responsibility for local life and conditions this will not happen simply by withdrawing the active role of the agencies who in reality have the major role in determining local conditions. A transition is needed. This is not a 'handing over' of responsibility from agencies to communities but an invigoration of *both* roles, a matched increase in effectiveness of complementary functions. The economy does not come from handing over functions from the state to people (or to social enterprises). It comes from the greater efficiency of heightened cooperation.

Appendix: Comparison of static and transformative community development

Components	STATIC CD	TRANSFORMATIVE CD
1. AIMS	Abstract, utopian, 'a long-term process'	Specific achievable improvements over given period of time within long-term perspective
2. THEORY	Bases theory entirely on values. Little explication of special techniques and skills. Substitutes CD aspirations for entire political programme to overcome poverty and achieve equality. Stands aloof from the main public services, which it sees as inherently bureaucratic and anti-community	Derives theory from CD's distinctive techniques and skills for fulfilling its values, primarily working with community groups. Sees CD as an essential component to galvanise progressive forces in other larger spheres of action, hence seeks alliances and interaction with main public services and their front-line workers. Concerned with specifying skills
3. STARTING POINT	'Start from where the community is' - often conceals low ambition projects with little historical context and signals low expectations to community members	'Start from where the community has got to' - builds onwards from strengths and human and material assets, acknowledges any previous CD work as part of a longer chain, building on achievements and encouraging high expectations in community members
4. COMMUNITY GROUPS	Works with specific community groups but often omits to make clear that this is the fundamental defining activity of CD; equates it unanalytically with working with the local population as a whole ('the community')	Works with specific community groups, makes clear that this is the fundamental defining activity of CD but sees the relationship of the group with the whole local population as something to be questioned, developed and monitored

5. PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE	Defines CD as something that can be done equally by paid workers or unpaid, and submerges the role of the CD worker in the action of the community group, hence avoids specifying the CDW input or opening it up to accountability. Speaks of 'working itself out of a job' but has no clear criteria for when the job has been done	Distinguishes the role of activists and paid CD workers. Paid CD work is only needed for what activists can't do for themselves (in a particular situation). Professional CD input is distinct from the action of the community group, requires a distinct set of skills, is accountable and exits when the job is done - ie when local activists can continue development without it
6. SCOPE	Recognises only fieldwork as authentic practice. Relegates managers, agencies, funders and policy-makers to being regrettable necessities	Sees fieldwork as fundamental but also sees management, strategy, team planning, advice to agencies, and interagency / partnership building as integral. Management role includes being 'fulcrum' between the 'top down' and 'bottom up' components.
7. COORDINATION AND QUASI-CD	Uneasy attitude to use of CD as part of another job by other front-line workers. Sees 'issue-based' CD as less authentic and doesn't seek to co-ordinate it with a larger picture	Welcomes different partial CD contributions across a neighbourhood from all agencies and sectors. Recognises the value of empowerment and engagement written into other occupations. Seeks to combine partial contributions within an overall mapping. Sees guiding CD coordination across a neighbourhood as a key role for the core of dedicated professional CD workers until residents can take up the role
8. NEIGHBOURHOOD	Focuses on individual projects in isolation, without monitoring overall neighbourhood condition, so unable to say whether the project's success is cancelled out by decline elsewhere	Prioritises building partnerships or networks across the neighbourhood and beyond; specifies target population and seeks to monitor overall progress

9. OUTCOMES	Unclear on outcomes. Alludes to unspecified idealistic long term goals	Outcome oriented, stressing timelines, interim outcomes and stages of progression
10. EVALUATION	Self evaluation by practitioners is taken as sufficient evidence of success. Lack of interest in statistics, demographics and objective measurement. Makes little or no use of official indicators and does not specify cost-benefits	Triangulates between practitioners' perceptions and evidence from communities and partner agencies. Makes best use of statistical information and official indicators. Seeks to provide strong evidence for the business case for CD including cost-benefits
11. FORMAL LOCAL DEMOCRACY	Formal democracy seen as sham, contact with councillors given low priority. Low value placed on any participative structures not emerging 'bottom up' from the community	Formal democracy seen as key framework needing invigoration. Councillors sought as allies. All participative structures valued and used to maximum. Strengthening formal democracy a core aim in parallel with informal participation
12. RELATION TO TOP-DOWN ENGAGEMENT	Spurns top-down community engagement as inauthentic. Uncomfortable with strategic planning as incompatible with responsiveness to the community.	Works simultaneously 'up', 'down' and 'across' the landscape of community groups and public agencies, proactively drawing agencies together to listen to communities, and community groups together to negotiate with agencies . Welcomes top-down community engagement as other side of the coin, a hook to link community action into
13. INFLUENCE	Helps communities influence authorities from 'below' one by one as issues emerge	Anticipates range of perennial issues and therefore range of agencies needing to be mobilised. Fosters community of practice in local agencies as well as the residential community

14. STANDARDS	<i>National Occupational Standards for CD: 600+</i> overlapping statements in a confusing framework but paradoxically a narrow view of the scope of CD, with little about management, coordination or outcomes. www.fcdl.co.uk	<i>Practical Standards for CD: 100</i> mutually exclusive statements in a clear progression from simple to complex, with key role for management, coordination and outcomes www.pacesempowerment.co.uk
15. POLICY	Assumes macro policy is intrinsically bureaucratic and hostile to community. Reacts to policy post-hoc, seeks niches to carry out CD at the end of the policy chain	Optimistic about the potential for policy to orientate to communities in increasingly fundamental ways. Seeks to intervene early in policy formulation and ensure that empowering communities is integral.