


Big Society and Localism – what is happening nationally?

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Defining Big Society and Localism: national perspective

Two separate, but interconnected things:

Localism
Government taking actions to devolve power away from Whitehall.

Big Society
Strengthening community power and activity.

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Defining Big Society and Localism: national perspective (contd)

Big Society
Much debated and contested term.

It is an "approach" – not a traditional programme with a process, targets and a budget.

Prime Minister said in July,
"The Big Society is about a huge culture change where people, in their everyday lives...feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities."

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Defining Big Society and Localism: national perspective (contd)

Government based its Big Society vision on:

Values

- Freedom – freedom that supports social responsibility and civil liberties
- Fairness – those who cannot, we always help
- Responsibility – those who can, do


Principles

- Social action – what people can do for each other
- Community empowerment – how people can help themselves
- Public service reform – what the state can do for people

Methods

- Decentralisation
- Transparency
- Providing finance

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Defining Big Society and Localism: national perspective (contd)

Reality

Lord Nat Wei has talked about:

- Defining the Big Society as a way of letting local people take more control of what happens in their communities.
- Big Society as a way of tackling isolation and of harnessing the potential of groups working together.
- Helping people to become more involved in improving the places where they live, without undue interference from the state.

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Defining Big Society and Localism: national perspective (contd)

Localism

Eric Pickles:


"Localism is the principle, the mantra, and defines everything we do."

"My job as Secretary of State is not to sit in my office, making all the decisions, pulling all the strings, coming up with more and more original ways to annoy you. It's to get out of your way, and to get everything else out of your way too."

Localism is not just about giving power back to local government. It is also about pushing power downwards and outwards to the community level.

Which is where it meets and becomes part of the Big Society approach.

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Specific Government actions

Big Society

- Supporting the creation and expansion of mutuals, co-operatives, charities and social enterprises, and involving them more in the running of public services.
- Giving public sector workers a new right to form employee-owned co-operatives and bid to take over the services they deliver.
- Training a new generation of community organisers and supporting the creation of neighbourhood groups across the UK, especially in the most deprived areas.
- Introducing a National Citizen Service.
- Using funds from dormant bank accounts to establish a Big Society Bank.
- Ensuring that the Civil Service supports communities around the country.

Four Vanguard areas across England, focussed on removing obstacles to the Big Society: Liverpool, Eden Valley (Cumbria), Windsor and Maidenhead and London Borough of Sutton

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Specific Government actions (contd)

Localism

In advance of the forthcoming Localism Bill, we already know about many proposed changes and actions, including:

- End of regional and local housing targets
- Introduction of Local Enterprise Partnerships
- Continuing interest in Participatory Budgeting
- Community Budgets initiative being piloted in Birmingham and elsewhere
- Changes to the planning system, including a community right to build, and various reforms to land use planning, including prospect of neighbourhood based land use plans

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 **Implications and opportunities**


Money

Now in a world of what promises to be massive budget reductions.

Issues about access to resources and arguments over resource allocation can only grow.

More decisions will be devolved to local authorities, but with fewer targets and less ring-fencing.

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 **Implications and opportunities (contd)**

Prime Minister has made it clear that local government has a responsibility not to make easy spending cuts to the voluntary sector:

"...we should say to every single council in the country, 'When it comes to looking at and trimming your budgets, don't do the easy thing, which is to cut money to the voluntary bodies and organisations working in our communities. Look at your core costs. Look at how you can do more for less. Look at the value for money you get from working with the voluntary sector ...and everyone should try to work in that direction.'"

Point is that local people in local communities can often do a better job than the traditional state in looking after their communities.

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 **Implications and opportunities (contd)**

Localism

Localism is primarily about local government.

And about local authorities as institutions.

There is a challenge here for the Big Society approach.

Increasingly important that local politicians represent the interests of communities first and foremost, rather than the interests of the local authority as an institution and arm of the state.

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 **Implications and opportunities (contd)**


Rural Big Society

Principles and rhetoric about both localism and the Big Society fit rural communities perfectly.

But challenge is how to use this to advantage.

Rural people and organisations that represent them need to be vocal in telling Government and elected representatives what will and what won't work.

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CRC activity

Focus over next few months includes work on Big Society and Localism.

Big Society – two main strands

Firstly:

- Showcasing the rural Big Society in practice; and
- Highlighting and encouraging practical actions from central and local government and others to help further deliver the Big Society agenda in rural communities.

Outputs:

- Recent report on economic aspects of Big Society.
- Forthcoming roundtable discussion with representatives from rural organisations.
- Good practice case studies of Big Society in action in rural communities.


Secondly

Providing advice to Government, and others, on Big Society related policies and programmes.

Outputs:

- Advice to Eden Valley vanguard area
- Advice to Government ahead of Localism Bill

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CRC activity (contd)

Localism

Made a number of formal arguments to Government, via recent CLG select committee inquiry on Localism, including need for:

- Government to ensure that devolution of power and responsibility away from central government takes account of strengths and good practice in rural communities.
- Real commitment to community led planning.
- Government to be minded that place based budgeting needs to occur at a small enough special scale to be of relevance and benefit to people in smaller, more rural communities.
- Public resource allocations between different places to be fair.

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CRC activity (contd)


Other related work

Includes providing:

- Stakeholder evidence on civil society/Big Society aspects and good practice relating to rural community based employment, skills and other economic practice
- Active support for Community Led Planning
- Guidance to rural communities on community renewable energy schemes
- Guidance supporting community Broadband solutions
- Promoting financial inclusion models and guidance for rural communities
- Guidance on use of public data at village/town/neighbourhood level
- Supporting good practice working between principal local authorities and local councils
- Chairing a review of the National Training Strategy for local councils

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Delivering an e-learning induction learning package for prospective and new parish and town councillors.



Conclusion

Rural communities have traditionally used many innovative approaches to community engagement, supported by high levels of volunteering effort.

One of the themes of CRC's recent State of the Countryside report was the evidence that rural people are in a strong position to respond positively to the Localism agenda.

But,

"Is there any point in being good at something if people don't know you're good at it?"

Big Society represents a real opportunity to promote and enhance the positive work that is already going on across many rural communities.

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