

# **Views on the Big Society**

**Exploring opinions on the Big Society amongst community development practitioners in the faith sector in England**

**May 2011**

## Summary

In a speech in Liverpool on 19<sup>th</sup> July 2010, David Cameron launched the concept of the Big Society. For those involved, he said that they would be part of *“the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in government to the man and woman on the street”*<sup>1</sup>. It promised to be a groundbreaking concept which would promote social action, empower communities and enable public service reform.

Since then the vision of the Big Society has received a mixed reception from communities and development practitioners throughout the UK.

To understand further the opinions and views of the Big Society, research was carried out by the Faith to Engage Project, in April 2011, to take a snapshot of opinion from within the faith sector.

The Faith to Engage Project is managed nationally by Faithworks and delivered by regional partners in the 9 English regions. The project is a Lottery-funded initiative established to support faith groups in England to work with each other, and with statutory bodies, to establish purposeful partnerships, share information and use their practical experience of serving communities to influence regional decision making.

This paper summarises the views of five voluntary and community sector organisations<sup>2</sup> all with active and diverse networks in the faith-based voluntary and community sector in England. All these organisations are currently involved in the 5-year Faith to Engage project<sup>3</sup> ([www.faithtoengage.net](http://www.faithtoengage.net)). These organisations together have a wide reach, influential membership and links with community-based projects spanning 5 of the 9 government regions in England. The aim of the research was to gather opinions on the concept of the Big Society from community-based practitioners in the faith sector, in order to present findings to central Government.

The following questions were posed to the 5 organisations:

1. *In your opinion, what is the Big Society?*
2. *Give three factors which you think are essential in helping to make the Government concept of the Big Society a success in your locality?*
3. *In your opinion, give three limitations of The Big Society.*
4. *Do you feel like you fully understand what the Big Society is aiming to achieve?*
5. *Please give at least one practical example of a project where the faith sector has worked to build the Big Society in your region.*

This paper provides a collation of the responses received.

The following 6 factors were raised as potential ideas to help to make the Big Society a success:

1. Provide clarity on the definition of the Big Society
2. Remove excessive bureaucracy
3. Recognise existing initiatives and good practice
4. Engage real mechanisms to hear real community views

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<sup>1</sup> David Cameron, July 2010

<sup>2</sup> The five community-based organisations are as follows: (1) MK Associates (based in the North East); (2) EMBARC (based in the East Midlands); (3) Faithnetsouthwest (based in the South West); (4) Zedekah (based in the South East) (5) London Churches Group For Social Action (based in central London).

<sup>3</sup> Funded by the Big Lottery, the aim of the Faith to Engage project is to support and resource networks of faith sector organisations in England, by working with existing local and regional bodies.

5. Allocate resources
6. Put in place transparent methods of evaluating success

The following 4 issues were raised as limitations of the Big Society which needed to be addressed:

1. The public perception that the Big Society is linked to budgetary cuts
2. Poor definition of the Big Society
3. Unrealistic view of volunteerism by central Government
4. Government can only encourage and not create the Big Society

A key theme highlighted was the perceived lack of clarity on the definition and aims of the Big Society. One year on, the need is still evident for Government to find a way to more clearly articulate this new concept. Even amidst a tentative desire to embrace the Big Society and the opportunities it may bring, there is a confusion and degree of cynicism regarding its true aim.

The concept of the Big Society seems to be welcomed to the degree that it highlights the valuable work of the voluntary and community sector, but there is a need for Government to put a lot of flesh on the bones to show what this will look like and how it will work.

The main body of this paper will identify practical suggestions which, it is hoped, will help Government to move towards a more authentic notion of community development, e.g. the removal of unnecessary bureaucracy, the recognition of existing good practice, the use of mechanisms to hear real community views, the allocation of tangible resources, the training of staff, easy-to-understand definitions, clear methods of working and the identification of existing social capital.

The Big Society is not necessarily a big and new concept. In fact, the Big Society is already happening in hundreds of small communities, churches and faith groups who have been working for centuries, to empower their local communities and see change in their neighbourhoods. There will be great value in the Government building on existing good practice, knowledge and expertise to help develop and sustain any future initiative.

## Section 1: Introduction

The existing contribution from the faith sector to the life of ordinary communities is well documented. Faith based organisations are ‘a strong force’ in the charitable sector, encompassing a large range of social action projects and programmes. It is noted that “*the total income of faith based registered charities is estimated at £4.6 billion*” and over half of faith based charities aim to serve the general public, and two fifths place a particular focus on children or young people.<sup>4</sup>

Faith groups play a vital role in serving poor and disadvantaged communities. Faith based organisations represent approximately 14 per cent of the sector (25,500 out of 180,000 charities registered have a religious basis by Charity Commission estimates) and approximately 37,600 churches currently engage in community work across the UK, beyond their traditional Sunday service.<sup>7</sup>

Faith based organisations often have a large volunteer base. The Home Office Citizenship Survey (2003) estimated that in the previous year, 57 per cent of those actively practising a religion had also been involved in formal volunteering in comparison to 38 per cent of others. According to research conducted on behalf of the Northwest Regional Development Agency (2005) faith based organisations contributed approximately 8.1 million volunteer hours per annum, with an estimated economic value of a little under £64.7 million<sup>5</sup>.

Faith communities often exist in areas where there are few, if any, community buildings, making them crucial cohesive agents in their communities. For example there are 47,000 churches in Britain – four times more than the number of village halls<sup>6</sup>. Each week, thousands of these churches carry out projects which work to meet the needs of their communities. Over 1.6million people in the UK currently use churches as a base for local voluntary work<sup>7</sup>.

Apart from economic contribution, local faith sector organisations often have extensive community knowledge and presence. They are often able to quickly assess community need and deliver a highly personalised service.

Churches and other faith groups across the country are crucially positioned in neighbourhoods around the country and the Big Society (BS) cannot succeed without them.

The BS projects a vision of a society characterised by ordinary people who are actively engaged in their neighbourhood and empowered to work collectively to increase the opportunities and quality of infrastructure and services in their communities. How much of this is rhetoric and, almost one year since its launch, how much of a difference has the BS made to the lives of community development practitioners at the grassroots level?

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<sup>4</sup> Faith Based Social Action and the Inter Faith Framework, 2008

<sup>5</sup> Faith in England’s Northwest: Economic Impact Assessment, February 2005

<sup>6</sup> ‘There’s no such thing as ‘big society’ – just many small ones, under steeples’, 21<sup>st</sup> April 2011

<sup>7</sup> The National Churches Trust Survey, March 2011

## Section 2: Perceptions of the Big Society

The dominant view during our research was that the concept of the BS is complex to define and, in reality, community development practitioners are still not clear on exactly what is meant by the BS.

To a certain extent, many think they understand what is meant by the BS, but they also feel they are left to develop their own interpretation of this new concept. Some think it is a legitimate campaign which aims to recognise and strengthen community development whilst others believe that the BS is a euphemism and cover for budgetary cuts - almost opposite interpretations of the same concept. The latter of these two views was overwhelmingly more common than the former. One contributor even referred to the BS as '*public service delivery on the cheap*', another as '*the government abdicating its responsibility*' and another as a '*political spin to win votes*'. Such cynical points of view were frequent during this consultation and the Government needs to do much work to dispel such public opinion.

One additional feeling raised during our research is that the goalposts have been moved. There is a perception that the BS was previously about people doing things for the common good, but now seems to include the possibility of supporting and in some case replacing front line services on a 'no cost' basis.

Positively, there is an appreciation of the way the whole concept of the BS clearly values the non-Government sector as a crucial partner in working towards a healthy society.

Finally, one overwhelming view represented was that many communities are and have been working towards an inclusive, fair, just and equal society for a long time and that more recognition should be given to the many small communities who have been working towards positive change for many years. No doubt there is always more to be done, but the case studies in section 5 help to give a snapshot of some of the valuable progress and achievements of faith communities and faith-based charities around the UK.

### Section 3: Ideas on how to make the Big Society a success

Below is a summary of factors raised as potential ideas for helping to make the BS a success:

- a. Provide clarity on the definition of the BS:** There is a concern that lack of clarity on the definition of the BS by central Government, could hinder any desired impact. In addition, people believe that there is a vagueness regarding who is due to deliver what, who is expected to benefit and how those delivering the BS will be trained, supported and/or resourced. Crucial points raised noted that *'current talk about the BS is creating barriers because of lack of clarity'* and *'the BS will only be successful over time if the vision is clear, trust built and people motivated and enabled to bring about change'*.
- b. Remove excessive bureaucracy:** There is a desire to see the removal of any bureaucratic red tape which hinders engagement and/or exerts excessive control and regulation, especially to small grass root organisations. Linked to this is a real concern that the BS concept could squeeze out (or put at risk) existing small initiatives. However, our research also revealed a slight anticipation by such groups, that the BS could offer new opportunities for smaller community groups.
- c. Recognise existing initiatives and good practice:** All new Government schemes around the BS, even if well-intentioned, need to value and encourage existing local initiatives, rather than sideline them. Existing professional community development projects and techniques are proven to build and develop long-term trust, measure impact, skilfully facilitate community change and empower communities, all which take time, training and expertise. There is a feeling that changes of the scale proposed could damage relationships which have been built over years, by stakeholders working together in communities. To mitigate this, the BS needs to work with people and organisations already trusted by their communities and statutory agencies and ensure that monitoring is integral to any intervention.
- d. Engage real mechanisms to hear real community views:** It is important that a genuine community voice is heard. Our research revealed a perception that Government (local or national) think they know best and that only those most able, well educated and/or with the loudest voice are heard. One contributor to our research stated that the BS is a *'male-led top-down initiative lacking local buy-in and not based on good community development principles.'* Central Government, local councils and communities need to work together, but it will not work if the BS becomes an exclusive club.
- e. Allocate resources:** To be successful, the BS requires people, money and organisation.
- f. Put in place transparent methods of evaluating success:** The BS needs to include clear methods of evaluation against outcomes and outputs, as currently demonstrated in professional community development methods. Such methodology is essential for sustainability. Accountabilities need to be in place and those tasked with leading need to be properly trained.

## Section 4: Some Limitations of the Big Society

When asked about the limitations of BS, the following issues were raised:

- a. The public perception that the BS is linked to budgetary cuts:** The BS is seen by many as the Government's plan to reduce services and cut jobs in local authorities. This is a clear hurdle to cross, particularly as it was, by far, the most dominant concern raised in our research. One particular contributor stated that *'the BS concept cannot be used simply as a smokescreen for making cuts in public expenditure'*. One example cited was that of a meeting at a church recently when the BS was mentioned and an individual said that his church would not support the BS because its underlying purpose was to take jobs away from people in local authorities and to get something for nothing.
- b. Poor definition of the BS:** As previously mentioned, it is felt that the BS is a concept without any clear definition and with no direction, both of which could hinder impact.
- c. Unrealistic view of volunteerism by central Government:** Nearly all the respondents mentioned the current lack of volunteering culture in the UK. The Government cannot rely on a universal culture of volunteerism to 'do' the BS. This absence of volunteerism culture needs to be recognised, and addressed. Of course, volunteers are a fantastic asset and add a special dimension to any community based project. However, volunteers need support, tangible encouragement and proper protection against litigation. This is one example of an area where Government needs to consider the cost of the BS and look at how it will fund its own initiative.
- d. Government can only encourage and not create the BS.** If the BS depends upon a social ethic which recognises that every member of the community is responsible for creating good society and which values and encourages individual and small-organisation participation, volunteering and enterprise, then, by its very nature, success cannot come from a top-down approach. Government can encourage, but not create, the desired grass roots activities and impact envisaged.

## Section 5: Faith and the Big Society

Our research unearthed numerous stories of faith groups engaged in community action, ranging from befriending schemes which value elderly people to youth clubs which empower marginalised and excluded teenagers. Simon Jenkins in his article in the Guardian in April 2011 suggests that '*churches are the most obvious place for revived localism*'<sup>8</sup>. One contributor to our research went so far to say that '*faith groups have been helping to build a 'Big Society', long before the current Government paraded the idea as if no one else has ever thought of it. In fact, Faith groups, particularly but not exclusively churches have been working to build such a society for the odd millennia or two!*'

In trying to understand exactly why churches in particular are so well-placed to be active vehicles of change in communities, our research revealed the following factors:

- Churches tend to care for people holistically.
- Churches tend to offer services to all (not just their members) and even provide umbrellas (organisational infrastructures) under which groups can form and operate.
- Churches have been doing this work for hundreds, even thousands, of years.
- Generally, the public trust churches.

Apart from inspiring their members to volunteer in many worthwhile projects and social campaigns, churches themselves provide and organise an average of two projects per church, all working to serve needs in their local communities. It is important to note that the feedback received suggests that faith-based projects are not fuelled out of a desire to meet Government agendas or to win tenders, but are often out of a desire to simply put their understanding of God into action. The distinctive ethos and values of faith-based service delivery need to be recognised to avoid falling into the trap of being shaped and moulded to look like government and replace its services. A key issue is not for churches to be smug in seeing themselves as a successful example of what is expected of the BS, but to rise to the challenge presented of developing and building new alliances that cross religious, political and societal boundaries.

The following are examples of existing work which already contribute to the BS vision of thriving communities:

### 1. Open every day of the week in Lincoln

Lincoln Baptist Church is an inner-city church, located in a very deprived area. By keeping its doors open every day, the church is able to work in partnership with other professional bodies to meet the needs of the surrounding community. Numerous groups, of a Christian faith or no faith, use the church premises each week. For example, the local Sure Start scheme (run by Children's Services) holds weekly events at the church, such as Messy Play, Parents Forum and Baby Clinic. Other regular activities in a typical week include ballet and tap classes, Chinese Bible Study, a Lunch Club for elderly residents and a Youth Club. In light of such activities, the local authority now recognises Lincoln Baptist Church as a good model of how to work in a mixed high migration area, as there has been encouraging evidence of improved social cohesion in the community.

### 2. Empowering Youth In Durham

In the Parish of Upper Skerne in the Diocese of Durham, 5 churches work together to run a regular youth group. In an area composed of former pit communities and of, predominantly, an agricultural background, this youth group gives teenagers space to be with their peers in an

<sup>8</sup> Article in The Guardian on 21<sup>st</sup> April 2011



informal setting, alongside working to build their skills and promote self-confidence. In particular, each member of the group takes on a functional role in the group (e.g. treasurer, membership coordinator, hospitality manager), to build their involvement in social activities and their confidence in contributing to community life.

### **3. Bristol Celebrates with a Diversity of Faith**

In November 2010, over 850 people came together to learn and celebrate at a one-day community festival called 'Celebrate Bristol'. Organised by a steering group of people from different faiths in Bristol, this event was a celebration of Bristol's diverse faiths, culture and communities. Events included live music, hymns, spoken word and workshops for adults and children. The day, organised by faith groups, enabled diverse groups to come together, to share ideas, work as community and discover mutual respect and understanding. Knock-on effects of this type of collaboration have included successful access of grant funding for community projects, positive links between faith leaders and the leader of the Bristol City Council and links with local schools.

### **4. The Big Society at a Little Church**

At St. Saviour's Church in Folkestone, a community audit was carried out in 2009 to identify gaps in local community provision and look at appropriate ways to respond through faith-based social action. As a result, the church now runs a fully-booked community centre, a popular 'Job Club' providing accredited skills, IT training particularly for elderly members of the community and lessons for foreign students. Feedback from users of the community centre show that people trust the services provide, because they are attending activities run from a church, even if they don't necessarily believe in God. The impact has been big, but it's a result of huge commitment, infinite energy, lots of love and bags of determination – all of which are essential for effective community development (and for the BS idea to work).

### **5. Lots is happening at Oasis Church Waterloo, London**

Serving the community is an essential part of Oasis Church Waterloo's life. For example, the Waterloo FoodBank, based at the church, works in partnership with frontline care professionals and North Lambeth Churches Together to identify individuals and families in need in the local area and provide them with emergency food. The church also runs a number of Community Groups, including a Community Choir, Running Group, Netball Group, and a Cooking with Friends group. Situated just 5 minutes from Guys & St. Thomas' Hospital, the church has been able to position two Youth Support Workers on staff within A&E and, during the winter months, the church runs a night shelter in the church for the homeless as part of the Robes project. In a city and society that can so easily breed loneliness and isolation the church also runs a number of Small Groups to help grow deeper, more meaningful relationships and to provide a sense of support. Finally, with a vision to bring adventure and inspiration, the church runs a range of activities throughout the week that young people (aged 7+) in the community can get involved with, including Southside Radio Station and Recording Studios, Hub Athletic Football, Waterloo Table Tennis, Hub Art, Hub Kids, Hub678, Homework Club and many other fun activities

## Section 6: Conclusion

Many in the faith sector have mixed opinions regarding BS, though it is clear that most of those who contributed to this document see the value in embracing this key Government plan and are keen to see next steps in order to understand how this vision can become a reality. The concept of the BS is welcomed, to a certain degree, but there is need for Government to put a lot of flesh on the bones for it to work effectively. The BS is also seen by some to politicise community engagement which is already taking place in many faith and community groups up and down the UK and risks alienating those already bringing real change to neighbourhoods around the UK. Many small communities, already working very hard to see the change which David Cameron so passionately desires, still need to be persuaded of the authenticity of the BS and the added value its vision can bring to their current community projects.

For further details on any information contained within this paper, contact: [info@faithtoengage.info](mailto:info@faithtoengage.info)

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