

'Big Society' in the UK: A Policy Review

Kathy Evans

Deputy Chief Executive of Children England, London, UK.

Alongside the UK Coalition Government's historic public spending cuts, the 'Big Society' has become a major narrative in UK political discourse. This article reviews key features of Big Society policies against their aims of rebalancing the economy and mending 'Broken Britain', with particular reference to their implications for children and young people, and for the voluntary and community sector working with them. Although many positives are acknowledged, flaws are identified in the lack of attention paid to the unique position of children in society, and in an inconsistent conceptualisation of the voluntary sector on which Big Society policies rely. © 2011 Children England. Children & Society © 2011 National Children's Bureau and Blackwell Publishing Limited

Keywords: 'Big Society', charity, citizenship, commissioning, voluntary and community sector, volunteering.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a voluntary organisation in possession of a good idea and in want of a meeting with a minister will use the buzz phrase 'Big Society' before breakfast, lunch and dinner. (Tim Loughton, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children, Young People and Families at the Edith Khan Memorial Lecture for CSV on 9 November 2010)

Against a backdrop of continuing global economic downturn, and spiralling assessments of the scale of its public spending deficit and national debt, the UK went the polls in May 2010, and came out with a Coalition Government between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. In the new political strategy of the new administration, which is dominated by the Coalition's decision to cut public spending deep and fast to pay off the deficit, the term 'Big Society' has become a major refrain running throughout Coalition Government announcements about their vision of a permanently 'rebalanced' economy and society. It is perhaps too big and varied a concept and set of measures to be called 'a policy' in its own right, therefore this article aims to gather together some of the key features of Big Society policies and references; to explore them as a 'political narrative'; to explore their implications for children and young people; and for the voluntary and community sector working with them.

The term 'Big Society' first made a public appearance in the Hugo Young memorial lecture by David Cameron in November 2009, in which he described his ambition of creating a transition 'from Big Government to Big Society' – taking power, responsibility and decision making from the state and giving it to individuals, neighbourhoods, or 'the lowest possible tier of government'. Such ambitions are perhaps more traditionally described as decentralisation or devolution, and also find expression with the new administration in the term 'localism'.

Big Society policies place great emphasis on the 'proud and longstanding charitable tradition' (Conservative Party, 2010) of the UK, as one of the main vehicles for their vision of civic renewal. And it is not only charities that the Government has become so interested in, but a

whole host of organisations that fall within the broad stable of what used to be known as the 'third sector' the Government has become increasingly fluent in, and – charities, social enterprise and community interest companies, mutuals and co-operatives, voluntary associations, volunteering, community trusts and local campaign groups. In keeping with its re-visioning of the role of voluntary and community enterprise in society, it has renamed the former Office of the Third Sector within the Cabinet Office as the Office for Civil Society. Indeed David Cameron has even gone so far as to rebrand the third sector as the 'first sector' of the new economy.

...we will want to do everything we can to help what used to be called, rather condescendingly, the third sector but I believe is the first sector: the excellent charities, voluntary organisations and social enterprises that do so much for our country ... so often these first sector organisations have the right answers to the social problems in our country. (The Rt Hon David Cameron, Prime Ministers Questions, 14 July 2010, Hansard)

For the Conservatives, the Big Society is the response to the central claim of their election campaign – that we are living in 'Broken Britain'. Big Society aims to help mend 'financially broken' Britain by being a better, cheaper alternative to an over-spending bloated public sector, and by helping the unemployed back into gainful and productive activity. Big Society aims to mend 'societally broken' Britain by nurturing people's altruism, generosity of time and spirit, and sense of agency to change the things they feel most strongly about. And Big Society aims to mend 'politically broken' Britain, by putting greater power and information in the hands of voters to hold their governors accountable for what they do, spend and achieve on their behalf.

So as a political narrative the Big Society has big ambitions, but what does it all really mean in practice? And how does Government intend to make this shift of power, and blossoming of voluntary enterprise happen? The truth is that it is hard to find a comprehensive articulation of all Big Society policies and references pulled together coherently in one place. At the time of writing, the Office for Civil Society is consulting on the needs and methods of supporting the voluntary and community sector, and many further pieces of the jigsaw remain to be filled in – for example, a promised Green (consultation) Paper on public sector commissioning of voluntary organisations; and the detail of plans for a Big Society Bank that could redirect the unclaimed assets in dormant bank accounts into investments in community enterprise. Most specific initiatives that fall under the Big Society umbrella, however, feature as stand-alone policies or elements of other major reform agendas. The Big Society is many things to many departments, but rarely quite the *same* thing in each. They are addressed here under the three main broad agendas in which the term Big Society features – public service reform, active citizenship, and transparency and accountability.

The Big Society in public service reform

The Big Society is a one of the strongest refrains throughout the Coalition Government's plans for mending '*financially Broken Britain*' through public service reform, which itself is an agenda driven by the biggest cuts in public spending for many decades. The Government has promised to 'work with local authorities to promote the delivery of public services by social enterprises, charities and the voluntary sector' (Conservative Party, 2010). In this context, the voluntary sector is characterised in diverse, and sometimes contradictory ways: as longstanding, independent and separate from state services; as competitors in the commissioning and procurements 'marketplace' for public contracts; as the vehicles through which

citizens and current practitioners of public services could enact a 'right' to takeover their services and breakaway from public sector control; as overly dependent on public funding; as cheaper, more efficient ways of delivering services; and as better quality, more innovative and responsive service providers.

The voluntary sector has generally welcomed the recognition that is being given of the value of the work and professionalism it delivers. However, many are all too aware of some of the inherent contradictions in these different characterisations. In one moment, the sector is said to be exposed to a substantial financial risk from the public spending cuts because it has, in the Government's characterisation, been part of a 'dependency culture' on public money; in the next, it is told that the way forward is to increase the volume and extent of public sector commissioning of voluntary sector organisations. But it is precisely the voluntary sector's success to date in competing for and securing public contracts in the commissioning environment that now places it at such financial risk from the immediate cuts to public spending – over £118 million in cuts to voluntary sector funding from local authorities in England between May and September 2010 alone, even before the UK Government's Spending Review decisions are implemented (Slack, 2010). This is particularly the case for children and young people's voluntary organisations, which have been through six years of major change towards increasingly commissioned services under local Children's Trusts. Is the voluntary sector the victim of its own success in a public service marketplace that the Government seeks to promote even more of, or is it guilty of society's purported 'dependency' on public spending that the Government seeks to wean us all off? Both the voluntary and statutory sectors know that this Government narrative does not quite add up.

Another challenge to the rhetoric and ambitions of Government in this arena is that contracting and commissioning are not, in reality, the 'handing over' or 'transferring' of public service responsibilities at all, but merely the arrangement of alternative delivery agencies for services that public bodies remain accountable for. In other words, commissioning the voluntary sector (or indeed the private sector) does not shrink the size or reach of the Big State, it just changes the means of delivering it. So one of the vanguard policies of the Big Society – the encouragement of what would be called 'management takeovers' in the corporate sector, but by public authority employees – appears likely to become little more than a lever for the creation of new competitors in an existing public sector marketplace. For the public employees who may currently be considering such a step, they will have to weigh up the potential attractions of running their team or department themselves as a co-operative or social enterprise, against the fact that they will still be just as vulnerable to public spending cuts (possibly more so as contractors than as public sector staff), and the possibility that they may soon find themselves outbid by larger organisations, some of which will be private sector companies that can offer economies of scale in pricing and more experienced tendering skills, when the commissioning cycle comes round again.

The ability of voluntary organisations to recruit and motivate volunteers is one of the critical 'working assumptions' beneath the Government view that they are a *cheaper* alternative to public services. Volunteering is indeed one of the most important defining features of the voluntary and community sector compared with its 'big sisters', the private and public sectors. The Government is also right to say that the voluntary sector can offer good value for money, and the ability to 'add value' to any state spending on them, through charitable fundraising and volunteer capacity. It is, however, vital that volunteering is respected and nurtured for its true voluntary nature. A reliance on volunteers where once we paid profes-

sionals for the same work, or a reliance on private donations where once we paid collectively through taxation, risks exploiting the fundamental altruism and freedom in the giving of one's time and money *as a gift*. It is also to risk a 'postcode lottery' of time and compassion becoming the haphazard driving force for wide local variations in volume, focus and quality of support services for children, young people and families – variations corresponding more closely to the interests, availability and generosity of local residents than to the nature and levels of actual service need. The New Economics Foundation (NEF) has critiqued Big Society plans (Coote, 2010), highlighting that, in a profoundly socio-economically unequal society such as the UK, the ability to participate in volunteer action is also unequally distributed, and limited by inequalities in capacity, access and time:

Building this 'Big Society' depends crucially on people having enough time to engage in local action. While of course everyone has the same number of hours in the day, some have a lot more control over their time than others. People with low-paid jobs and big family responsibilities – especially lone parents – tend to be poor in discretionary time as well as money.... In short, long hours, low wages and lack of control over how time is spent undermine a key premise of the 'Big Society', which is that social and financial gains will come from replacing paid with unpaid labour.

It must also be recognised that although volunteer time is unpaid, the training, co-ordination and support of volunteers' work requires accountable management (whether itself paid or unpaid), and requires clarity about the purpose to which their time and skills can contribute most meaningfully and safely. This need for an infrastructure to support volunteering is particularly the case where volunteers may be working with children, young people and other vulnerable service users. The capacity to support volunteering within the sector, however, faces substantial shrinkage, as volunteer bureaux, sector infrastructure bodies and service delivery organisations' own management structures are being pared to the bone if they are to survive the cuts at all. Volunteers are not a cost free workforce, even if they do meet the Government's description of doing what they do for free. The distinction may sound subtle, semantic even, but an understanding of this reality has substantial implications for the achievability of government ambitions to see volunteering flourish while delivering severe cuts.

The voluntary sector, and volunteering, is also envisaged as having an important role in the Government's controversial reforms to the work programme for the unemployed. It is yet to be seen whether volunteer work might be drawn within the scope of new measures to sanction job seekers who refuse to take up jobs and 'work activities' they are directed to, on pain of reducing or withdrawing their benefits. But with many in the voluntary and community sector already very concerned about the impact of such sanctions and other benefit reforms on the poorest children and families, it is a prospect that certainly does not sit well with the history and traditions of volunteering within the sector to date.

The Big Society promoting active citizens

The second major objective of the Big Society is to mend '*societally Broken Britain*', by placing emphasis on the importance of individual action, activism and self-reliance – people doing things to help themselves and each other out of the goodness of their hearts or the fire in their belly, rather than waiting for, or 'depending on', the State to do it for them. Again, the primary vehicle for this is viewed to be volunteering (which has already been extensively

discussed here in relation to public service reform), but with an added emphasis on nurturing people's sense of community, citizenship and civic duty.

Specifically, the initiatives that have so far been launched to support this aim are: a pilot National Citizens Service for 16 to 19 year olds; funding for 5000 community organisers spread across the country (a 'neighbourhood army' to stimulate community action); the building of a Big Society Network of active citizens and community organisations; the Communities First Neighbourhood Grant Fund; and a Big Society Day and annual Big Society Awards for outstanding achievement. Four 'Vanguard areas' of the Big Society have been identified as taking the lead in nurturing citizen and community-led action: Liverpool, Eden Valley in Cumbria, Windsor and Maidenhead, and the London Borough of Sutton.

This is in fact the only area of the Big Society narrative where children or young people feature specifically at all in the Government's plans, and even here it is only between the ages of 16 and 19, as beneficiaries of the National Citizen Service (NCS). A recent poll (Jozwiak, 2010) suggests that a majority of young people welcome the NCS and hope to be able to take part in the 5-week summer programmes that will aim to nurture civic-mindedness, and generate social and community action by young people. There will only, however, be 11 000 places nationally in the first year, for an age group numbering more than 750 000 in England, with understandable questions about the affordability of any major upscaling in a context of continued spending cuts thereafter. This raises the question of whether equitable access can be assured if schemes are over-subscribed, which they are even more likely to be in the context of astonishingly deep (and in some local areas, complete) cuts to wider, year-round youth services (House of Commons Hansard, 2010).

More widely, there has largely been silence on the planned role and contribution of children and young people as citizens and community members themselves. Silence may quite simply be inferred as meaning that they are not singled out for special mention but are included in Government plans. However, the fact that a national scheme is felt to be needed to promote citizenship among 16- to 19-year olds could, equally reasonably, be taken to infer that until that age, and without overt tutelage, the young are not yet conceived of as citizens within their communities in their own right. This would be a perspective vigorously challenged by the voluntary and community sector, much of whose current work is focussed on empowering children and young people to undertake collaborative, imaginative and constructive action within their communities, just as the Government's narrative advocates. The learning from such work would also strongly suggest the need for named and overt inclusion of children and young people within plans for building local community and citizenship, precisely because of how often they are excluded and viewed as either being too young to have positive views and contributions of their own to make, or more negatively, perceived as a threat to their communities' sense of peace and safety. One of the biggest volunteer drives launched in the UK since the Coalition came to power – for volunteers to help with the 2012 London Olympics – has already excluded anyone under 16 years (therefore 18 by the time of the event) from applying, lending weight to a more exclusive interpretation of the Government's aspirations, as well as being to the great disappointment of many young people keen to contribute. On this basis, and while welcoming the overall aim of promoting active citizens, there is room to be concerned by the partial and tightly programmed referencing of children and young people's role within the Big Society.

The Big Society creating new accountability and transparency in Government

The third big aim of the Big Society, to mend *politically Broken Britain*, has the most wide-ranging and potentially radical implications for the whole of society, although it receives perhaps less public attention as being what the Government really means by 'Big Society'. Forged as they were during the collapse of public confidence in political accountability during the parliamentary expenses scandals of 2009, Big Society reforms essentially promise a complete inversion of Government power structures, a dismantling of the institutions and secrets of the Big State, while putting citizens themselves in possession of information and new rights to know and challenge the fine detail of Government accounts and activities.

This aspect of the Big Society agenda combines major, wholesale devolution of budgets and responsibilities, with the removal of almost all centralised ring fences, regulations and requirements on how they are to be spent and delivered. It is the driver behind a plethora of fundamental reviews of inspection bodies, regulatory frameworks and monitoring bodies, and hundreds of big national organisations, often characterised by Government as: bureaucratic and ineffective; out of touch with the priorities and needs of taxpayers and service users; and, institutionally prone to profligate spending of public finances for which they are largely unaccountable.

Performance management and monitoring of local authorities by central government is to disappear, with Whitehall departments refocused on plans to deliver only the reforms within their direct control, rather than being held accountable for whole systems of public service from top to bottom. Replacing the former framework by which local authorities were assessed, inspected and rated for their performance, there will now be a range of prescribed and discretionary sets of data and other information that all citizens will be entitled to know, and to use as the evidence with which to lobby and challenge politicians, local and national government departments. Whitehall has already initiated an extensive and frank process of publishing the minutiae of departmental spending, as well as their business plans and 'structural reform plans' (HM Government, 2010), as mechanisms expected to enable greater transparency and accountability of the national Government to its voters. New democratic rights, such as constituency powers to recall MPs for misconduct, and new elected positions in the local public sector landscape, are expected but yet to be clearly pinned down or legislated for.

For the children's sector, this is perhaps where some of the most significant structural changes and impacts begin to appear. The abolition of the ContactPoint database¹ was one of the earliest and most publicised withdrawals of a national system driven from Whitehall. But it was only the first. Schools are to be removed from legal requirements to participate in their local children and young people's partnerships, and given complete autonomy over the budgets devolved to them. Health services for children and parents will be decided upon, and purchased directly by, their neighbourhood family doctors. The national Children's Workforce Development Council will be wound up in 2012. The national vetting and barring regulations for staff and volunteers working with children are suspended, pending the outcomes of a substantial review of the systems and regulations surrounding child protection practice. OFSTED's inspection powers and functions across all schools and children's services face potential relaxation and reform. All these (and many more) reforms have profound impacts for the local service landscape serving children and young people, and the understandings that professionals, service-planners and policy-makers within the sector have developed over

many years, of the checks and balances, quality standards and minimum requirements that are, or should be, common to all services for children, young people and families across the country.

This is not to suggest that all of these changes are inherently problematic or undesirable, nor indeed that there may not, in the end, be some improvements for children and families arising from these seismic shifts in systems, structures and the freeing up of local services from systematic constraints. However, in their simultaneous impacts and cumulative magnitude, these reforms will be profoundly destabilising to the sector, making it simply too early to know exactly how and where they might deliver any real improvement for children and families. As a minimum, we must understand that professionals' ability to provide some critical services confidently and continuously throughout such upheavals will be at some risk.

Perhaps the most important challenge to this 'inverted State' aspect of Big Society reforms, however, is to ask how children and young people themselves are to be granted the rights and powers to hold their politicians and public servants to account, in the context of the Government's general view that this kind of 'citizens' challenge' is what should properly replace burdensome, top-down regulation and inspection. Without having voting rights, specific attention must be paid to alternative accountability mechanisms for children and young people, and there has, over the last decade, been extensive development of participation and consultation, youth councils and other initiatives that feed young people's views and priorities directly into decision making that affects them. Many of these youth involvement mechanisms have, however, proved to be among the first to be cut as councils focus their extremely strained resources on maintaining the most critical frontline services. Can it be assumed that parents will gather, interpret and use the newly available information to challenge, agitate and lobby on their children's behalf? Even where some do, what will that mechanism offer the children whose own parents are not in fact their best or most confident advocates in life, let alone with governments? What of the child whose carer is the local authority, or whose needs are often politically unpopular with voters, such as asylum-seekers or young offenders? The potentially reformed role of a reviewed Children's Commissioner for England (Gove, 2010) may have real relevance to these questions. The Big Society vision places even greater significance on their role as an independent voice and watchdog for all children, and they will need to be given a clear, empowered and well-articulated function on behalf of children, to challenge politicians, public services and authorities on their decisions about, and treatment of society's youngest citizens.

Concluding thoughts

There is a great deal to welcome, and much potential to be seen, in the ideas and reforms of the Big Society. The Government's very recent proposal to develop Quality of Life indicators, to complement the monetary focus on GDP as our measure of society's growth and success, will be absolutely vital to evidencing the real worth of a sector that could never properly be seen in purely cash terms. It will be even more critical that such surveys include children and young people themselves as assessors of their quality of life, and ask for their views about the present and future. After all, if the Government's eye-watering deficit reduction strategy is being pushed through in the name of making sure that our children can look towards a less indebted and bleak future than we otherwise face today, then theirs are perhaps the most important perspectives of all in measuring our success.

For the voluntary and community sector, the profile that the Big Society gives them as a distinctive player in a truly 'tri-sectoral' national economy, is really important. All of the many varied statements being made by Government about what the voluntary sector is, and can achieve, are all true from one angle or another, or they have at least some seeds of truth in them. But the Government's narrative does not yet add up coherently to show a real understanding of how the whole complex, idiosyncratic 'Cinderella economy' of voluntary and community enterprise really works, nor do their maths about its prospects of surviving (let alone thriving) as public spending cuts kick in. It would indeed be a radical step forward to bust the myth once and for all that our nation's economic health and wealth is made purely by the economy's two 'big ugly sisters', private and public. So Cinderella may have a real chance to finally make it to the economic ball. The worry is that she will arrive just when all the food's gone, and will end up having to clear up the mess her sisters have left behind. Again!

Note

1 A national database intended to contain contact details for every child in England, their primary carers, schools and any other professionals working with them, created under the Children Act 2004.

References

- Conservative Party. 2010. *Invitation to join the Government of Britain: Conservative Party manifesto 2010*. Available at <http://www.conservatives.com/Policy/Manifesto.aspx> [Accessed 16 December 2010].
- Coote A. 2010. *The Big Society and the New Austerity*. London: New Economics Foundation/NEF.
- Gove M. 2010. Written ministerial statement on the Independent review of the Children's Commissioner for England. Department for Education press notice, 12 July. Available at <http://www.education.gov.uk/inthenews/inthenews/a0061716/written-ministerial-statement-on-the-independent-review-of-the-childrens-commissioner-for-england> [Accessed 16 December 2010].
- HM Government. 2010. Business plans published. Number 10 Downing Street press notice, 8 November. Available at <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/latest-news/2010/11/business-plans-published-2-56688> [Accessed 16 December 2010].
- House of Commons Hansard. 2010. 23 November, Westminster Hall debate on Youth Work, 519: 77, 26–67.
- Jozwiak G. 2010. National Citizen Service proves a hit with teens in CYP Now poll. *Children and Young People Now*, 5–11 October, 1.
- Slack B. 2010. Coping with the cuts. *Charity Insight*, 19 October. Available at <http://www.charityinsight.com/features/income-generation/coping-with-the-cuts> [Accessed 16 December 2010].

Correspondence to: Kathy Evans, Deputy Chief Executive, Children England. E-mail: kathy@childrenengland.org.uk