

The 'Big Society' – making it work

Over the past year, the 'Big Society' has become a frequently quoted, but often misunderstood, label for any initiative that involves less activity by the state, and more activity by individuals or 'communities'. It is a cornerstone of current Government policy, and although the term is already somewhat tarnished by overuse, it is not going to go away.

With its roots in voluntarism, community activity and social enterprise, the 'Big Society' can be seen as the natural province of the voluntary and community sector. In fact the sector has argued that the 'Big Society' is simply what we have always done, and this is true. However treating the Big Society as only the concern of the voluntary and community sector is to miss the (usually unspoken) other side of the Government's policy approach, which is 'Big Society, Small State'. This equation creates a fundamental change in the relationship between the state, the voluntary sector, and citizens which requires a partnership response if services and support that individuals rely on are to be maintained.

The attached diagram (adapted from a recent Times article) attempts to represent the ideological shift represented by the 'Big Society'. Although not perfect, it is quite helpful in understanding the different strands that contribute to the overall concept.

The previous 'Big Government' model (pink circles) involves the majority of public services being provided by the public sector, with charities involved in delivering certain services using public sector funding. The 'Big Society' (blue circles) shows a reduced role for the public sector, with expanded and interlinked roles for communities, charities and the private sector.

The shift from Big Government to the Big Society requires substantial behaviour change by individuals, communities, charities and businesses, to fulfil the roles that the Big Society model demands. The main motivational driver for this to happen would seem to rely on people's willingness to fill the service gaps that are being created by the massive cuts in public sector provision (although for some charities, there may be an element of self-preservation involved in taking on more public service provision as previous sources of funding dry up).

Regardless of whether we agree with the Big Society model as the right way to provide for citizens' needs, it is indisputable that reductions in public sector provision are happening, and will continue to happen over the next few years at least. This will have significant consequences for people who rely on public services, especially those who are most vulnerable and least able to purchase alternatives for themselves.

The alternatives available are either to wait and see if the Big Society spontaneously arises to fill the gaps (in line with a strand of Government thinking that seems to suggest that past provision of public services, and consequent reliance on the state, has stifled community and social enterprise

activity that would otherwise have developed to meet needs); or to pro-actively work to bring about the changes that may ameliorate some of the worst effects of public service reductions.

The changes in the activity and behaviour of individuals, communities, charities, and the business sector which the Big Society model requires are very unlikely to happen spontaneously at a speed and reach that will match the reduction in public sector funding. There are ways in which the necessary changes can be encouraged and supported, but these are likely to involve concerted and focussed effort by a range of partners if they are to succeed.

1. Increased activity by individuals and communities

The theory:

Individuals and communities will join forces locally to provide services for themselves.

Current practice:

Existing community groups throughout the County already provide a very wide range of services and support in their communities, including support for older and disabled people, children's activities, arts and cultural groups, etc. There are over 3,000 voluntary sector organisations in North Yorkshire and York and around half of these are very small groups that receive no public funding and are usually run entirely by volunteers. Although some are generic (local community centre committee or residents association) the majority have a relatively narrow focus on a particular user-group or need. This type of community activity has generally grown up organically to fill the gaps between existing public services, in line with the concerns of motivated individuals. It is not necessarily structured in a way that enables such groups to take an overview of changing local needs, or to take on additional activity. There is often a mismatch between need and community provision, with those communities experiencing most disadvantage being least likely to spontaneously develop community solutions.

The allocation of £600,000 of Performance Reward Grant to be made available as small grants to community groups through the Community Foundation is a valuable source of funding that can help groups to meet local needs effectively at very low cost. This initiative is an important element in supporting future development of more community activity.

There is practical support available to those setting up or running community groups through the voluntary sector local support and development organisations (Councils for Voluntary Service, Voluntary Actions, Volunteer Centres, Rural Action Yorkshire, North Yorkshire and York Forum), which provide help and advice with legal and governance issues; funding; financial management; business planning; operational issues such as good volunteer management; health and safety, safeguarding and diversity; and for larger groups employment advice, collaboration, partnership working and representation. However these support organisations are already over-

stretched in meeting existing demand, and facing funding reductions which will limit future capacity.

Volunteer Centres also provide a brokerage service for individuals wanting to get involved with existing voluntary sector organisations, as volunteers or trustees. Whilst there have been increases in interest in volunteering by some groups (particularly unemployed people and young people wanting career-related experience), reductions in funding to voluntary organisations limits their capacity to take on more volunteers because of the time involved in recruiting, training and managing volunteers.

A range of other organisations also have a role in supporting local community activity, including Children's Centres, neighbourhood workers, and other public sector staff working in communities (for example, Police Sergeants are being trained by the LSDO Funding Advice Network to be able to signpost community groups to appropriate support). Unfortunately some nationally funded support for new social enterprise (Business Link) is being withdrawn later this year and replaced with web-based information. Experience of support agencies shows that for many groups, face to face support is needed in the early stages to help them through the initial legal and organisational development issues involved in establishing a new organisation, and this is especially so where there is a need to develop community provision quickly. Existing organisations are also identifying that they have a range of development needs if they are to play a significant part in future service delivery (as evidenced in recent work by Rural Action Yorkshire with local village hall committees).

The 'Active Communities' proposal for Performance Reward Grant was designed specifically to help initiate and support community activity in areas of most need, either where there is historical disadvantage, or where a conjugation of public sector service withdrawals creates a 'hotspot' making the area a priority for stimulating community-based alternatives. The project will provide intensive community development support to enable community solutions to be progressed more rapidly and with more intensive support than is normally possible. However attempts through the Thriving Third Sector group to co-ordinate information about the cumulative effect of forthcoming funding cuts have not been successful, making effective targeting of initial work difficult.

One challenge with attempting to stimulate new community activity to compensate for withdrawal of local services is the inevitable initial antagonism to cuts. It is likely that most people's initial response to public service withdrawal will be to attempt to fight the cuts, and it can be some time before energy is diverted to creating alternatives (as has been seen with the consultation on library closures).

Government initiatives:

Community Organisers – provision of a country wide workforce of volunteer community organisers who will work with communities to help them meet their own needs. Currently being piloted in 10 areas, it is not yet known when this will be rolled out elsewhere. There seems to be some resistance by the

national organisation responsible for the scheme, to linking their activity with that of existing local support and development organisations. The initiative may provide a useful stimulus to local community activity, but it may come too little to late to fill the gaps currently being created in public services.

Things most likely to help support increased community activity:

- Shared view of priority areas where increased community activity is needed – to inform targeting of resources including Active Communities work, and possibly NY Reward Fund
- Mapping of all bodies involved in providing community development support in any form – enabling collaborative approaches on the ground and better sharing of available resources
- Mapping of under-used public/community buildings, and consideration of resource sharing or asset transfer as a means of supporting new community activity
- Improved accessibility of information about where individuals and communities can get practical support for community initiatives
- Support for volunteering strategy
- Success stories/case studies demonstrating what can be done.

2. More provision of public services by charities and social enterprises

The theory:

Many services currently delivered by the public sector will be run by charities and social enterprises instead, or by employee co-operatives and other new forms e.g. parent-run schools.

Current practice:

This shift towards public service delivery by the voluntary sector has been going on for some years, with increased emphasis on contracting and competitive tendering, which has in its turn resulted in some pressure towards more collaborative working to enable small organisations to collectively compete for larger contracts that they could individually bid for. This has had some benefits for the sector, but also places considerable demands on organisations and requires a cultural change that many have struggled with. There is increasing awareness in the sector of the need to develop new skills and a more business-oriented approach in order both to compete with private sector providers, and to adapt to new funding models eg personalisation.

The Innovations Fund being implemented by NYCC Adult and Community Services will provide funding for voluntary sector organisations to pilot new models of community-based service delivery to vulnerable people, and is a good example of investment in the sector designed to achieve longer term benefits which is particularly important when other sources of funding are becoming more restricted.

The voluntary sector local support and development organisations provide a range of training and one to one organisational support to assist sector organisations to adapt to these changes, as do specialist organisations such

as the North Yorkshire Learning Consortium. A major funding advice, information and training event is being planned by the NY Funding Advice Network for November 11. Some early work has commenced around a workforce development strategy for a workforce development strategy for the voluntary sector, although as yet there are no specific resources for this work. Many voluntary organisations are restricting their investment in staff and volunteer training as part of their response to funding cuts. The Social Enterprise Network North Yorkshire, which has provided learning and networking opportunities for new and existing social enterprises across the County, ceased being funded from March 2011.

New work has recently started through the local support and development organisations to provide support to voluntary organisations around preparing their organisations for personalisation. Starting with provision of a personalisation 'health check', this process is likely to throw up a range of future support needs that will need further work to meet.

Some of the development needs of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector are specific to the sector and need to be addressed within the sector. Some training is already made available to the voluntary sector by NYYC Adults and Children's Services. A more joined up approach could assist organisations to meet their development needs at minimal cost. There may also be learning needs for public sector staff considering following the 'social enterprise' route for the services they currently provide.

Many voluntary sector and social enterprise organisations are potentially interested in taking on provision of public services, or taking over running of public sector buildings for community activity. Similarly there seems to be an in principle willingness on the part of public services to contemplate transferring services, and possibly assets, to the sector. At the moment there is no clear process for bringing the two together, and some reticence on the part of voluntary sector organisations to appear insensitive in rushing forward to undertake activity that may affect public staff currently doing those tasks. Whilst the Localism Bill will provide the 'community right to challenge' public sector service delivery (and if successful lead to a tendering process for an alternative provider), a less confrontational approach, at an early stage, may lead to better outcomes. There are particular concerns that the right to challenge may not necessarily lead to local community based providers securing future delivery of the challenged service.

Better knowledge about the range of voluntary sector organisations operating in the area may help public sector bodies to enter into dialogue with appropriate organisations. Work is in hand to put in place a user-friendly, searchable, publicly accessible web end to the support and development organisations' database of voluntary and community organisations, which may help meet this need.

Government initiatives:

Removal of 'red tape' – reducing regulation on charities, making it easier for them to engage in public service delivery

Localism Bill – right to ‘challenge’ to provide public services (resulting in tendering process)
‘Charitisation’ (or other legal forms eg co-ops, social enterprises) of former public services

Things most likely to support more provision of public services by charities and social enterprises

- Dialogue between public bodies and the voluntary sector about services which the public sector intends to stop providing, and which voluntary sector organisations may be able to deliver.
- Skills development for existing third sector organisations, to better equip them for this more competitive environment
- More accessible information for those wanting to set up a social enterprise (or similar) about where to go for support and advice.
- Better information available to public bodies about the scale and scope of the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector.

3. Support for local voluntary and community services by businesses

The theory:

Local businesses will contribute resources to those providing local services through:

- Philanthropy – giving money
- Corporate volunteering – enabling and encouraging employees to undertake voluntary work, often on paid time.
- Pro bono support – offering expertise to community and voluntary sector organisations on an unpaid basis, e.g. legal, technical, business skills

Current practice:

The Community Foundation has existed in North Yorkshire for over 10 years, with the purpose of providing an easy channel for philanthropists to donate money to local causes (as well as managing funds from government and other external sources). Although it has successfully distributed substantial sums of money to local organisations (usually targeted at small community groups), it has not succeeded in building up a significant ongoing endowment fund.

Some voluntary sector organisations have good links with the private sector through sponsorship or promotional type relationships. These can be very productive for both partners, but require significant investment of time by voluntary sector organisations in relationship building, and can favour certain types of organisations that are more publicly sympathetic.

Employee volunteering has a long history but works best where there is dedicated support to support employers in running a scheme, and in managing the relationships with beneficiary organisations. This role can be fulfilled by Volunteer Centres, although capacity is very limited. In some areas support for employee volunteering is funded by participating employers, but this involves significant initial investment of time in engaging employers with

the potential benefits to them (usually staff development objectives). Employee volunteering activity is often best suited to short term 'team' projects, rather than the ongoing delivery of community services.

'Pro-help', 'Lawworks' and similar national schemes broker support from professionals willing to donate expertise to local charities. This can work very well if a suitable match is made, but is not very widely used.

Government initiatives:

Big Society Bank (wholesale bank to provide loan finance for social enterprise)

New funding models for social enterprise (largely loan-based)

Encouragement for corporate giving (although there are concerns that this may result in donations to high profile national causes, rather than local initiatives).

Things most likely to help increase business support for local services

This is possibly the most problematic area of the Big Society model as it is hard to see where the motivation for the private sector to contribute resources will come from, where it does not exist already. It may be that there is scope for using existing partnership structures, and partners' relationships with private sector organisations, to promote business engagement with the sector.

The new Local Enterprise Partnership may be a suitable vehicle for engaging local business partners in considering how the private sector can help support social enterprise and community activity.

Overall factors for success:

- Recognition that all partners have a role to play in supporting increased voluntary, community and social enterprise sector role in providing services and support previously provided by public sector
- Effective communication and dialogue about public sector service reductions and the ways in which the sector may contribute to reducing the impact of these
- Better co-ordination of the support available for community development, with targeting of available resources to the areas most in need and/or most able to benefit from support.
- More structured and co-ordinated approach to supporting sector organisations wanting to take on public service delivery
- Engagement of the business sector in the above where possible.

If this approach is supported, the Thriving Third Sector group could develop a practical action plan to enable all partners to contribute to this work.

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