

PACES Empowerment

# Big society and public services: complementarity or erosion?

*EXECUTIVE SUMMARY only*

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## 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.
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