

# BIG SOCIETY AND PUBLIC SERVICES

## Complementarity or erosion?

The two main principles put forward together in big society policy - strengthening the independence of communities, and encouraging them to take over public services - are in contradiction with each other, claims a new study from think-tank **PACES Empowerment** ([www.pacesempowerment.co.uk](http://www.pacesempowerment.co.uk) then click the 'Big Society and Public Services' download).

***Big Society and Public Services***, by Gabriel Chanan and Colin Miller, says that taking over public services makes voluntary organisations more, not less dependent on the state, through contracts with public authorities. The most independent and economical form of community action is the work of community groups which carry out their own activities.

Supporting community groups is economical because they take pressure off public services by spreading their own forms of wellbeing, informal skills, learning, mutual aid and personal responsibility, and require only a fraction of their value through state support.

The national survey of third sector organisations shows that these groups are the great majority of the third sector, but they receive only a small proportion of the support they need. (The survey, by far the largest of the sector ever done in England, was commissioned by the Office for Civil Society. See [www.nstso.com](http://www.nstso.com) or [www.nscsesurvey.com](http://www.nscsesurvey.com) )

Independent of the state, and consisting mainly of members and volunteers, community groups can also express the views of communities and hold public services to account, no matter which sector the services are delivered by. Social enterprises under contract to the state consist of paid staff and cannot perform this role without conflict of interest.

The answer, says PACES, is to make empowering communities the leading big society policy with its own criteria and investment. The main methods would be reformed community development, better amenities for groups and more widely available grants.

Commissioning voluntary organisations and social enterprises to carry out public services should be a supplementary policy, including giving the best chance to genuinely local grass-roots groups which can handle the dual roles separately.

*Other free-to-download papers on the PACES website include:*

***The Big Society: How It Could Work*** - including an item-by item appraisal of 22 components that were in the Conservative election manifesto

***Practical Standards for Community Development*** - an alternative to the National Occupational Standards for CD, shorter and simpler but wider in scope.

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