



HOUSE OF LORDS

# Library Note

## **Debate on 21 November: ResPublica Report *Holistic Mission: Social Action and the Church of England***

This Library Note provides background reading for the debate to be held on Thursday, 21 November to:

“take note of the July 2013 report by ResPublica, *Holistic Mission: Social action and the Church of England*”

This report sets out the case for the Church of England to play an enlarged role in civil society as an enabler of holistic, inter-personalised, localised social action. This Library Note provides background reading in advance of the debate on the report. It presents an overview of the main arguments of the ResPublica report and provides broad context to some of the issues and themes raised in it. The Note sets out background to the Government’s Big Society agenda and then considers its view of faith groups, their role in civil society and their potential as providers of public services. The Note then discusses the Church of England in relation to the Big Society agenda and concludes with some further issues raised by commentators about faith groups’ role as public services providers.

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14 November 2013  
LLN 2013/033

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## I. Introduction

In July 2013, the think tank ResPublica published [Holistic Mission: Social Action and the Church of England](#). The report explored the current place of the Church of England in civil society and whether it could potentially play a greater role as a coordinator of social action. Written by James Noyes and Phillip Blond, *Holistic Mission* sets out a case for the Church of England to become the “foundational enabling and mediating institution” for public service delivery between government and civil society. The report suggested that the Church was uniquely placed to fulfil the role, which was needed to coordinate Big Society activity:

The many charities and local civic groups that are out there have done enormously important work but virtually all are partial in the problems they tackle or the areas they operate in. Few can go to the scale required to become the type of institutions we need. We know from the failures and successes of the Big Society programme that what was most needed was a hub or an institution which the myriad social and local projects doing great good could latch onto and link up with. Crucially, we lacked an institutional platform that could allow both diversity and universality, that could function as a hub bridging, linking and rendering capacity, imagination and expertise within and through the network it provides the foundation for. There is perhaps, only one non-state and non-market association which is universal in the sense of being literally almost everywhere, but local in that its focus is always that of the specific locality, its people and all their needs. That association is the Church of England.

(ResPublica, [Holistic Mission: Social Action and the Church of England](#), July 2013, p 7)

In an article for ConservativeHome, Phillip Blond, one of the report’s authors, explained why such an institution was needed:

What Britain lacks is what has been taken away: institutions that can provide holistic, personal and hyper-local care, service and response. Currently the state delivers via departmental silos, resulting in disjointed and partial care with Government services often conflicting in aims and outcomes. Private sector provision has similarly failed, with ‘cherry picking’ privatisation producing fragmented services and a profit motive which all too often conspires against pricing in the holistic solutions needed. Communities exhausted by the break-up of traditional structures of both families and communities are simply unable to access the all-inclusive and bespoke provision that alone can transform their lives. Unless we tackle this institutional deficit we will not save the poor from poverty or secure the middle classes against a similar fate.

We need new, transformative institutions that speak to our widest needs and tackle the multiple and interrelated problems that people face. The government has already tacitly accepted this analysis, with free schools attempting to bridge just this sort of institutional deficit, and the holistic approach to troubled families already having been inaugurated. Let’s follow this progressive logic forward to where it next leads—the Church of England.

(Conservative Home, [‘Phillip Blond: Why the Government Needs to Let the Church of England Deliver More Public Services’](#), 14 July 2013)

This Library Note provides background reading in advance of the debate on the report. Section 2 presents an overview of the main arguments of the ResPublica report and the recommendations it makes. The sections that follow provide broad context to some of the issues and themes raised by the report. Section 3 provides background to the Government's Big Society agenda with particular emphasis on its policies in relation to public service reform. It then considers the Government's view of faith groups, their role in civil society and their potential for deliverers of public services. Section 4 of the Note discusses the Church of England in relation to the Big Society agenda. The Note then concludes with section 5 which provides examples of some of the issues raised in the debate about faith groups as public service providers.

## **2. Holistic Mission—Social Action and the Church of England**

In the report, the authors argued that institutions were “crucial to brokering the future of the country” as a country was unable to progress without “both enabling and mediating institutions that leverage people into education, skills and shared prosperity” (ResPublica, [Holistic Mission: Social Action and the Church of England](#), July 2013, p 3). Evidence from “British Society over the last thirty years” showed that:

[...] those who fall behind do so progressively and aggressively whether the majority are doing well or ill. Part of the change in modern society is that the rewards accrue more and more to the winners and less and less to the losers. And as the winners get fewer, the losers grow and steadily proliferate.

(p 6)

One reason offered for this state of affairs was the “relative fanaticism of our politics, all too often divorced from the human person who should be its subject, not its object”. This resulted in outcomes where:

Either the state is presented to us as replacement for the social good and its delivery, or we are abandoned to the free market, robbed of our institutions all together and left to rely on our own resources, however depleted they may be. Trapped between individualism and collectivism we Britons have since the Second World War gradually eroded and ultimately eliminated most of our mediating and immediate institutions.

(p 6)

The report identified the Church of England as having the “potential, the experience and the capacity” to offer “the holistic, personal and local social care and action that we require”. The authors argued that “among all available organisations the Church is uniquely positioned to create a radical new offer on the basis of an ancient institution that can provide universal access and standards combined with local variation and innovation” (p 3). The authors asserted that the Church of England had a number of strengths that led them to put forward this proposition. These were:

## People

Research carried out for the report found that levels of social action were “considerably higher amongst church attendees than the general population”. Its survey revealed that:

- 79 percent of church congregations engage in some formal voluntary action compared to just 40 percent of the general population
- 90 percent are involved in informal voluntary activity as opposed to 54 percent of the general population.
- Two thirds of those doing voluntary action state that it is through the Church, one fifth of those doing such work support those with disabilities.

(pp 3–4)

## Experience

The Church was said to have “a wealth of in-depth and varied experience across most fields and in most areas”. In particular, the authors highlighted the Church’s role in: helping women recover from prostitution; mental health; work experience and training; homelessness and drug dependency; and prisoner rehabilitation. This work showed that the Church was “already doing it all and in many cases it is delivering a greater level of care than the state and the market were ever able to”. Furthermore this work was supported by a body of people “characterised by a high level of education and managerial ability of its attendees, the experience of its staff and the enormous range of assets it currently brokers for the good of all” (p 4).

## Structure

The Church’s “unique structure” was also a strength, which enabled it to be “incredibly diverse in our cities” such as London, yet also traditional in “representing an enormous number of people who might be predominately educated older and white but who wish nonetheless to simply help everybody regardless of who they are”. Moreover, the authors were impressed with the Church’s “hyper-localism” and its concern for its diocese and local area. This enabled the Church to have a “reach and a granular knowledge that exceeds the capacity of the state. It can go where few else can and it therefore can do more than almost any other national organisation”. The Church could therefore be viewed as:

[A] unique gateway organisation not concerned with itself but with the whole life of the country and all the communities that constitute our nation. It allows people to come and go and opens up connections between all parties without regard to itself. In this sense, the established Church is a public realm and one which arguably extends beyond the state to all of the people of this country and the equal flourishing of us all.

(p 8)

## Motive

Motivation was also a key consideration and the authors noted a clear “link between faith and social action”, one which was “central to the Christian tradition”. The report argued that the “Church considers social action to be part of its mission and service, reflecting in particular the

gospel and ‘God’s call to the poor’”. Consequently, the Church, the authors stated, sought “not just to ameliorate a damaged society but to fundamentally reorder the systemic nature of contemporary injustice and so genuinely heal the world” (p 9).

In terms of the congregation it was also established that faith was a prime source of motivation for wanting to get involved. The report argued that its research provided evidence that those who volunteered did so not to proselytise, with 88 percent of respondents agreeing that they were comfortable helping people who had different values or religious beliefs, and with 65 percent strongly agreeing with this (p 4).

## **Conclusions**

In spite of these strengths, the authors stated that this did not mean the Church was “yet fit for the purposes we envisage here, nor does it mean as a fundamentally human institution that is free of faults, error and failure”. The authors argued that rather what the Church did have was:

[A]n unparalleled potential to become an institution that all of Britain desperately needs. What we argue in this report is that the Church is an utterly unique institution with enormous reservoirs of good will, education and capacity, as well as an asset base that—because it can be put to the use of all of our communities—can transform every community.

(p 8)

The authors made a number of specific recommendations to the Government and the Church. The general thrust of the recommendations was provided in the report’s executive summary:

### **The Church has to make itself fit for purpose**

If the Church is to fulfil its purpose and its potential, it has to substantially upgrade its internal and external structures. It has to adapt to the governance demands for accountability and standards by the state whilst at the same time allowing its localities to innovate and create. It needs to create co-ordinated structures to realign its provision from excellence in some places to entirely absent in others. It should develop an ‘at scale’ corporate offer that can leverage all the distinction and variation of its current provision into a more truly universal service which can change the lives and outcomes of the people and localities it serves. Crucially, over 80 percent of respondents said that organisations involved in social action need more support and guidance. This is itself a marker that much, much more needs to be done.

### **The Government has to create the opening, the incentive and the encouragement**

The Government has to accept that the current model is broken. Neither nationalisation or privatisation can save the poor from their fate and secure the middle classes in the 21st century. We need government to build on its reform agenda and think meaningfully about institutional innovation. We need the government to encourage the Church to partner with it in a way that is consistent with the Church’s vision and beliefs to help create an institution that can transform our lives and our communities through holistic and personal forms of service delivery that care for the whole human person. Government needs to help the Church become procurement and

delivery ready, and the Church needs to help the government by telling them what people really and genuinely need.

(ResPublica, [Holistic Mission: Social Action and the Church of England](#), July 2013, p 4)

### 3. Government, the Big Society Agenda and Public Service Delivery

Since becoming Conservative party leader in 2005, David Cameron has often spoken about ways of strengthening civil society. Before the last general election he was urged in an article by Phillip Blond to “develop a ‘red Tory’ communitarianism, socially conservative but sceptical of neoliberal economics”. In the article, Mr Blond argued for a return to policy rooted in “the tradition of communitarian civic conservatism” (Phillip Blond, [‘Rise of the Red Tories’](#), *Prospect*, 28 February 2009). The same year, David Cameron spoke at the launch of ResPublica, telling the audience that “there has never been a more important time for deep and radical thinking about the change we need in our country” (Ross Hawkins, [‘Cameron Backs Phillip Blond’s “Red Tory” Think Tank’](#), *BBC News*, 26 November 2009). The interest in communitarian ideas was reflected in the Conservative party manifesto in 2010, which set out its plans to move thinking from “big government to big society”. This ‘Big Society’ was articulated as “a society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control” (Conservatives, [Invitation to Join the Government of Britain](#), 2010, p 37).

David Cameron has continued to speak on the theme of the Big Society since becoming Prime Minister. In July 2010, in his first major speech on the issue since the election, he sought to elaborate on its objective:

You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment. You can call it freedom. You can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society.

The Big Society is about a huge culture change where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace don’t always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities.

It’s about people setting up great new schools. Businesses helping people getting trained for work. Charities working to rehabilitate offenders.

It’s about liberation—the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street.

(Conservative Party website, [‘David Cameron: Our Big Society Agenda’](#), 19 July 2010)

In a guidance document, *Building the Big Society*, the Cabinet Office said there were five aspects to the policy: give communities more powers; encourage people to take an active role in their communities; transfer power from central to local government; support co-ops, mutual, charities and social enterprises; and publish government data (Cabinet Office, [Building the Big Society](#), May 2010). The guidance specified that the Government would “support the creation and expansion of mutuals, co-operatives, charities and social enterprises, and support these

groups to have much greater involvement in the running of public services” (ibid). In a speech in 2011, Mr Cameron explained that for public services this would put:

[...] the people who use them and pay for them in the driving seat, restoring professional discretion and calling on our charities, social enterprises and private companies to get involved, we can build world-class public services that are engines of opportunity and that help build our Big Society.

(Gov.uk, [‘Speech on the Big Society’](#), 23 May 2011)

In practice, Mr Cameron added, the Government would:

Break open state monopolies and open up them up to new providers, saying—‘if you’ve got the ideas and the people and the commitment to tackle our most deep-rooted social problems, come and play a role in our public services.’

Wherever possible put power—and money—in people’s hands to choose what’s best for them.

The [Open Public Services](#) White Paper published in July 2011 (Cm 8145) set out the principles behind this approach to public services. An open letter from Nick Hurd, Minister for Civil Society, to Sir Stephen Bubb, Chief Executive of the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO), in January 2013 set out some of the progress made on this policy to date:

We are opening up our public services so that charities, social enterprises and local groups can play their part. In Education, 80 new Free Schools have already been established by local parents, with another 102 due to open by September 2013. And we have provided the funding for a social enterprise—Teach First—to quadruple the number of teachers it trains every year. In Health, as a member of the NHS Future Forum, you are right to welcome the bigger role that the reforms allow charities to play. Mutuals in the NHS and across the public services are putting staff in the driving seat and are already delivering around £1b of services. The Work Programme’s payment-by-results requirement has been challenging for some providers, but it has allowed hundreds of charities to get involved in helping almost 200,000 to find a job. I know you’ll welcome Chris Grayling’s plans for a ‘rehabilitation revolution’ that will allow the voluntary sector to help break the pernicious cycle of reoffending.

(Cabinet Office, [‘Nick Hurd Responds to Sir Stephen Bubb’s Letter on the Big Society’](#), 8 January 2013)

### 3.1 Faith Groups

Since the general election, the Government has spoken in support of faith groups and the role they play in local communities. Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, has said that “for years, faith communities have been quietly making a huge difference day-in and day-out, to every single neighbourhood in the country—something that has not been sufficiently recognised by central Government”. He argued that some saw “religion as a problem that needs to be solved” whereas the current Government saw “it as part of the solution. I want to send an important signal that we value the role of religion and

faith in public life. The days of the state trying to suppress Christianity and other faiths are over.” (Department for Communities and Local Government, [‘Ministers Talk Big Society With Faith Leaders’](#), 10 July 2010).

In a speech to Church of England Bishops in 2010, Baroness Warsi, the then Minister Without Portfolio, spoke at greater length about the importance of the contribution of faith communities to society, saying it was “incredible that many people of faith give up their evenings to work as street pastors making sure that young men are less at risk of knife crime and young women less likely to run into trouble after a night out”. She observed that it was such groups that were “very often” offering innovative approaches to helping people in their communities. She told the audience:

[...] in England it’s hard not to notice the presence in every community of a parish church served by clergy. It’s absurd to stereotype these parishes as ‘holy huddles’. They are hubs around which people of all faiths and none can meet, greet and build relationships in what can be a fragmented society. As you know better than any of us, they are also the bases where post offices, libraries and job clubs have been co-located. They are the place where self-help groups for those facing addictions can meet affordably.

So the real question is not: “how should big government be controlling faith-based organisations” but “how can government help people of faith do even more to build the Big Society?”

(Conservative Party website, [‘Sayeeda Warsi: The Importance of Faith to Life in Britain’](#), 15 September 2010)

She added that the Government’s policy was to support faith groups to continue to make such a contribution:

Faith gives rise to huge numbers of personal kindnesses and other civic contributions; faith shapes beliefs, behaviour and a sense of purpose; and so what government should be doing is helping people of faith express themselves in this way.

My conviction is that in a stronger and bigger society the scope for people of faith to take their places as equals at the public table should become easier not just on so called ‘stake-holding’ bodies but as the vanguard of an increasingly decentralised civic society.

Just imagine if the whole nation could give to charity at the same levels as people of faith already do. The question is how can government help to bring that about?

One big part of it is about giving you—charities, churches, faith groups, community groups—the chance to do even more good. That means giving you the chance to take control over local community buildings or run services where the community thinks that you could do that well.

Under our plans, you will have more power, more responsibility, and more choice over how to get involved in your communities and over how to apply your skills.

Another part of it is about showing that we are all in this together, and ensuring that no community and no corner of society gets left behind.

That's one of the reasons why the Cabinet Office plans to establish a new fund to invest in poorer communities, called the Communities First Fund.

And then there is the funding you will be able to access through our Big Society Bank—a bank built up not of new taxpayers' money, but unclaimed bank accounts.

But above all we want to encourage a bonfire of the petty rules and prejudices that have held you and others back for so long.

(Conservative Party website, '[Sayeeda Warsi: The Importance of Faith to Life in Britain](#)', 15 September 2010)

Responding to a debate on religious life in the House of Lords in 2012, Baroness Warsi, Minister for Faith and Communities, reiterated the Government's positive view of the contribution of religion to public life. She observed that "faith communities make a vital contribution to national life and have done for centuries: guiding the moral outlook of many, inspiring great numbers of people to community service, providing help to those in need" (HL *Hansard*, 22 November 2012, cols [2045–8](#)). She added that "across the country, people from different faiths work hard in countless churches, mosques, temples, gurdwaras and synagogues, and in charities and community groups, to address problems in their local communities". There were, she said, 30,000 faith-based charities in this country that "make a huge difference at home and abroad. We warmly endorse the work of charities that do so much to support the fabric of society for the public benefit". She said that the Government would continue to support the work of faith groups but was keen to help enable such groups to cooperate in their work:

[...] Places of worship of different faiths in a town or city can sometimes be unaware of the work each is doing, often to address similar problems. The Government want to help build effective, co-operative working relationships between people of different faiths. We continue to fund the important work of the Inter Faith Network for the UK and the Faith-based Regeneration Network, intermediary bodies that link up, encourage and resource interfaith dialogue projects and faith-based social action. The previous Government had supported an annual Interfaith Week since 2009 and we are delighted to continue to do so.

(cols [2045–8](#))

In response to a question about the Government's work with the Church of England in further developing the Big Society, Baroness Hanham, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Communities and Local Government, told the House of Lords that the Government were "actively working with faith community leaders in order to create the big society". She said meetings had taken place with the Church of England to discuss the Big Society, and such meetings would continue to take place. The Minister agreed that the Church of England was "well placed" to provide community help because of its geographical spread but she added the Government would "work happily not only with the Church but indeed with all faith communities" (HL *Hansard*, 12 May 2011, col [977](#)).

## 3.2 Near Neighbours Programme

In February 2011 it was announced that the Department for Communities and Local Government would provide £5 million to the Church Urban Fund for a three-year programme that aimed “to bring together people from diverse communities and different faiths to get to know each other better and help them improve their local neighbourhoods”. The Near Neighbours website provides more detail about the programme:

[...] The Church of England parish system recognises a duty of care for all, and has for decades been working locally with partners in multi-faith areas to foster the better relationships and understanding that help build better communities.

The infrastructure is already in place through the Church, the Church Urban Fund and their partners to deliver this new initiative within local communities, so the money goes where it is needed without creating new layers of administration.

Examples of this work:

- Faith leader training—the Christian Muslim Forum has pioneered residential weekends, where pairs of local ministers and imams from the same neighbourhood spend a residential weekend together to get to know each other better, build a relationship and share it with their congregation and mosque community.
- The Feast, which works with secondary school age young people and builds relationships between young Christians and Muslims.
- The Nehemiah Foundation trains and supports people and organisations committed to transforming and improving their local communities.

Near Neighbours will extend this work to other organisations working for better social interaction and understanding, including the Council of Christians and Jews, The Hindu Christian Forum, the Christian Muslim Forum and Sikh and other religious communities.

(Church Urban Fund website, '[About Near Neighbours](#)', accessed 11 November 2013)

Speaking at the launch of the Near Neighbours programme in November 2011 Eric Pickles, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, said that:

Too often communities that live side by side don't get together as often as they could to discuss and tackle the issues and challenges that matter to them most. This can lead to isolation and misunderstandings which are not healthy for local communities, when by and large, irrespective of creed or faith most people want the same thing, for their neighbourhoods to be better places to live.

Faith groups play a vital role in our neighbourhoods. We want to give them help to do what they do best. That's why we are funding Near Neighbours as an investment in the future; supporting grass roots groups and projects to allow communities to get on transforming their neighbourhoods for the better

(Department for Communities and Local Government, '[Launch of Near Neighbours Programme](#)', 14 November 2011)

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon told Peers in a debate in 2013 that the funding of the Near Neighbours programme was a reflection of the Government's appreciation of the Church of England's capacity to deliver:

[I]t would not make sense for us as a Government to fail to take account of the fact that the churches, for example, have an extensive national framework of buildings, experience and volunteers that puts them at the very heart of service delivery to the homeless and others in need. We recognised that when we invested £5 million in the Church Urban Fund's Near Neighbours programme, which uses the infrastructure of the Church of England to build productive working relationships between people of different faiths and none at a local level in five key localities in England, thus maximising the impact of faith-based social action and creating more integrated communities. I should note that beneficiaries of Near Neighbours projects are from all faith backgrounds and none.

(HL *Hansard*, 25 July 2013, col [1497](#))

#### 4. Church of England and the Big Society

In terms of civil society, the Church of England "maintains a presence in every community through the parish system. Our churches are communities of and for the area and the people who live there." The Church states that this "presence enables the Church to engage with the lives of our villages, towns and cities in both rich and poor neighbourhoods. The Church of England has a fundamental concern about the quality of life in community, and often works alongside other partners (churches, faith groups, the voluntary sector, schools and councils) to seek justice and wellbeing" (Church of England, '[A Theology for Community Ministry](#)', accessed 11 November 2013).

At an evidence session before the House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration, the Bishop of Leicester, Tim Stevens, provided MPs with an indication of the scope of the Church's role in civil society:

If, for example, there were such a diminution as to remove the Church of England's contribution to the Big Society from the public square, you subtract at a stroke some 19,000 trained deployed ministers, both clergy and lay readers; the availability of some 16,000 churches, church halls and community hubs; the engagement with the provision of public education; and the deployment now of the largest number of youth workers of any organisation in the country. The annual expenditure by congregations on their clergy, the maintenance of their church buildings and their outreach work is £700 million a year, £0.7 billion. The total turnover of the Church of England is a billion pounds.

(House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration, '[The Big Society](#)', 14 December 2011, HC 902-I of session 2010–12, ev 54–67)

A survey of Church community activity, published in January 2013, provided a further picture:

- 54 percent of parishes, equating to more than 6,500 of the 12,512 parishes in England, run organised activities to address at least one social need in their community.
- 82 percent of parishes, equating to more than 10,000, have been asked for help by people in their community and in response have provided informal support.
- Parishes are most likely to support people experiencing isolation and loneliness (40 percent of parishes organise activities to address this need) and least likely to support those struggling with poor housing or benefit dependency (with just 3 percent addressing these issues).
- Parishes offer a wide range of activities for their local communities: 69 percent provide support with school work, 54 percent offer activities to care for the elderly and 51 percent run parent and toddler groups.
- Three-quarters of parishes have an ‘active and close working relationship’ with schools in their area, but fewer than one in five have a similar relationship with the council or the police.

(Church Urban Fund and Church of England, [‘Key Findings—the Church in Action: a National Survey of Church-led Social Action’](#), January 2013)

In terms of the Church’s response to the Big Society, in November 2010 the General Synod debated *The Big Society and the Church of England*, a report from the Mission and Public Affairs Council. This assessed the arguments but concluded that “the Church has an interest in seeing the best elements of The Big Society thinking succeed” (Church of England, [‘The Big Society’](#), 11 November 2013). The paper concluded that the Big Society debate offered the Church an opportunity it should explore:

The Big Society is, in principle, natural territory for the Church of England. In parishes all over the country, the Church is already creating and sustaining a “Big Society”. What we now see is a government moving to build social policy around such local commitments. However, it is not yet clear exactly how the government will embody the theme across its policies.

In *Near Neighbours*, we have made an “earnest of intent” to work with the government in the pursuit of social cohesion. It will be up to us to ensure that the reasons for our participation, the terms of our involvement and the sticking points beyond which cooperation is impossible, are clear and help to inform any future relationships under the banner of The Big Society.

In other areas of church life, including the developing use and maintenance of our buildings and our unique investment in education through church schools, The Big Society offers real potential for “shifting the dominant narrative” of people, community and society in ways which will enable the Church to live out its vocation more openly and constructively. There will also be many opportunities at local level for the Church to engage with statutory and other bodies to develop new programmes and initiatives

which enhance the common good and sustain local communities. The Church needs to be prepared, at diocesan and parish level, as well as nationally, to respond constructively but wisely to a new phase in the relationship between government, church and community.

The Big Society may come to represent a radical and ambitious shift in the way society and government are conceived: one in which the Church has more room to be itself. Whether this shift away from individualism is achievable, given the power of wider economic and cultural factors, is another question, but this does not invalidate the aspiration. Politicians who are pursuing The Big Society are playing for high stakes.

(Church of England, [“The Big Society” and the Church of England](#), November 2010, GS1804, paras 76–79)

Since 2010, a number of Church figures have voiced concern about the Big Society as it has developed. Foremost among those voices was Rowan Williams, the then Archbishop of Canterbury and now Lord Williams of Oystermouth, who in a book expressed fears about the political motive behind the Big Society agenda. The *Observer* reported that he had said:

Big society rhetoric is all too often heard by many therefore as aspirational waffle designed to conceal a deeply damaging withdrawal of the state from its responsibilities to the most vulnerable [...] if the big society is anything better than a slogan looking increasingly threadbare as we look at our society reeling under the impact of public spending cuts, then discussion on this subject has got to take on board some of those issues about what it is to be a citizen and where it is that we most deeply and helpfully acquire the resources of civic identity and dignity.

(Toby Helm and Julian Coman, [“Rowan Williams Pours Scorn On David Cameron’s ‘Big Society’](#)”, *Observer*, 24 June 2012)

When asked in 2011 about whether the Big Society was being used as a cover for cuts to services, the Bishop of Leicester, Tim Stevens, said the Church needed to be “alert to the dangers and the possible devices that might be used to turn churches into utilitarian deliverers of services, that we become, as it were, the means to a political end, whereas I think we see the pursuit of our religion as an end in itself—it has meaning in itself”. He added:

Volunteering, serving others, reaching out to the poor, is not simply a device; it is the way in which human beings discover who we truly are. It is the means to human flourishing. That is what we want to hold as a vision before people and why we want to continue to participate in this conversation.

(House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration, [The Big Society](#), 14 December 2011, HC 902-I of session 2010–12, ev 54–67)

In opening a Lords debate in 2008 on the Church and welfare services, the then Bishop of Chelmsford, John Gladwin, raised some concerns. These related to the Church delivering public services, particularly the issue of independence of the Church, and the possibility of the impact of cuts on those services. He asked:

Churches may enter into partnership with public authorities and win funding, but what about the long-term viability? Dependency on state funding can first raise things up and

then promptly let them down. As they rise up and sink down, how do they maintain their distinctive identity, in this case as Christian contributions to public life? How does the state respect and uphold the freedom and distinctiveness of civil society and especially of Christian contributions? If we face the difficult task of getting churches to see themselves as holding a faith that is essentially in the public forum and part of public life in a democratic culture, how do we get the state to stop wanting to control things through the public purse? Time and again, partnership falls apart around those questions.

(HL *Hansard*, 9 October 2008, col [364](#))

The Church of England has itself noted on its website that “many in the churches worry that the economic constraints of an austerity budget will make it harder than ever to find the resources for communities to flourish, especially among the least well-off and marginalised people” (Church of England, ‘[The Big Society](#)’, accessed 12 November 2013). In 2013, a report to the General Synod by the Mission and Public Affairs Council stated its disappointment with progress on the Big Society. It said:

Those behind this idea sought to regenerate local communities as a way of rolling back the increasingly bureaucratic and impersonal state welfare provision. The Church, at many levels, strongly supported the Big Society principle.

Three years on, we have seen very little of The Big Society in policy or practical terms. Instead, the voluntary sector is facing a pincer-like squeeze between declining income from giving (normal during a prolonged recession) and considerable cuts to government funding. There is very little to show for the Church’s strong support for a new settlement between the state and local voluntary action.

The effective abandonment of the Big Society means that the philosophical foundations for a new settlement between the state and voluntarism have been lost. The current round of welfare reforms are seeking to change the relationship between the state and the citizen without the careful rebuilding of local structures that would have offered a real alternative to monolithic state provision.

(Church of England, [Welfare Reform and the Church: A Report from the Mission and Public Affairs Council](#), GS1897, paras 15–17)

Following publication of this report, the General Synod approved a motion calling for a “renewed settlement between the state, the churches and civil society”. In a speech, Philip Fletcher, Chair of the Mission and Public Affairs Council, stated: “We don’t claim [...] that the whole responsibility for the welfare of our citizens should fall on the shoulders of the state—on the contrary, we would welcome a properly thought-through settlement between the state and the voluntary structures of society, including the Church, as a way of building up communities and promoting neighbourliness” (Church of England, ‘[Welfare Reform and the Church—Synod Invites Government to Re-open Big Society Talks](#)’, 7 July 2013).

Related to this there has, since 2010, been discussion about the capacity the Church currently has in relation to service delivery. The Bishop of Leicester, Tim Stevens, told the House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration in 2011 that there needed to be realism

about what the Church could provide in terms of public service delivery. The Church, he said, could not be viewed as a replacement for local authorities:

I was speaking earlier about the number of ministers, clergy and lay, and the number of churches in the Church of England, if you aggregate them they come to a very substantial critical mass of resource and activity. But they cannot be an alternative to public service provision across the piece. They cannot deliver the professionalism, they cannot deliver the resources, they cannot deliver the standards, they cannot deliver the consistency, and they should not be expected to. But what they can do is add value, they can mobilise volunteers, they can support initiatives, and in localities they can do things that are small scale and transformational. That is what, I think, politicians need to be alert to. What is it appropriate to expect a parish church in the city centre to do; or a village church in a community that has lost its post office that might open up its facilities to provide one; or a local police centre; or an outreach centre to completely destitute asylum seekers; or a programme working with young people not in employment, education or training? There are a whole variety of categories here, where volunteers—well mobilised, well led, well resourced and well managed, sometimes by paid professionals—can have a transformational effect but not in a way that simply expects the Church to behave like a local authority or a Government department.

(House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration, [The Big Society](#), 14 December 2011, HC 902-1 of session 2010–12, ev 54–67)

This picture of localised, rather than comprehensive across the services, provision was reflected in the survey by the Church Urban Fund, which found gaps in the types of services currently provided for by the Church. It explained that:

It appears that parishes feel more able to respond to certain social needs than others. For example, 84 percent of the respondents who identified lack of self-esteem/hope as a ‘major’ or ‘significant’ problem in their parish, were addressing that need with organised activities or informal help. Just 16 percent were doing nothing or very little. On the other hand, only 36 percent of those who saw poor housing as a ‘major’ or ‘significant’ problem in their parish, were offering any form of help and 64 percent were doing little if anything.

(Church Urban Fund and Church of England, [‘Key Findings—the Church in Action: a National Survey of Church-led Social Action’](#), January 2013)

Following the November 2010 meeting, the General Synod commissioned Hillary Russell to conduct a feasibility study, its “main purpose was to act as a catalyst in bringing together current best practice in Christian care in local communities with the resources and knowledge base needed to multiply those good works across the country”. The study found that:

- The main driver for Christian community action projects is the desire to serve the local community either in response to some immediately perceived problem or following investigation of local needs.
- Local projects encompass an enormously wide variety of activities, express a range of theological themes, including hospitality, presence, liberation, inclusion and justice and represent an immense contribution to the wellbeing of local communities.

- Many projects rely heavily on volunteers whose contribution of time and skills can be equivalent to many thousands of pounds per year even to individual projects.
- Projects increasingly have to be accountable to funders and supporters which makes it important for them to be able to quantify their achievements as well as articulate their qualitative impact.
- Strengths specific to effective faith-based projects include faith as their underpinning and motive force, their integration with the church for different sorts of support and encouragement, their local roots and longstanding presence and their stress on the whole person and his or her needs.
- One of the key barriers at present is lack of funding. Uncertainty about future funding and making repeated funding bids can be a massive drain on energy.
- Service changes and the current austerity measures are both a challenge and an opportunity. On the one hand, there are fewer resources to meet a rising tide of need. On the other, there are some openings for new collaborative ways of working.
- Provision for social responsibility is shrinking in some dioceses as a result of financial pressures and yet is a vital source of support essential to unlocking local energies and capacity.

(Hilary Russell, [Resourcing Christian Community Action: Parishes and Partnerships](#), February 2012, p v)

The study concluded with the following points:

- In some ways, the jury is still out on the Big Society. There seems to be an open invitation to take on a greater community role, but rhetoric is not necessarily matched by reality. This is a time of flux in the lives of many of the communities and projects represented here. The combined effects of the economic downturn and the government's austerity measures mean both increased need particularly among already vulnerable people in already deprived neighbourhoods and tighter purse strings amongst potential funders of voluntary organisations, including church groups. The opportunities may be there to become more involved in service delivery but mainly without the resources to enable this to happen.
- The projects described in this study put neighbourliness into practice, but they need support in this from the wider church in terms of prayer, understanding, information, practical assistance and, sometimes, strategic direction. Some projects had encountered negative attitudes inside the church as well as external barriers. That the Christian mission in the world "is not just to enable the church to flourish but to promote the flourishing of all people" remains a message that needs to be driven home.

- There is another role for the wider church and its leaders. At project level, there can be tensions between the pastoral and prophetic roles; between meeting needs and speaking out about the impact of the economy and public policies on vulnerable people and communities. Yet the strong social bonds that these projects are trying to generate have to be embodied in economic and social policies and institutions as well as expressed in inter-personal relationships. The existence of this Christian community action, its presence and sustained service in all parts of society gives the church the experience and authority to be able to speak with integrity in the public arena with and for those who would not otherwise have a voice.

(Hilary Russell, [Resourcing Christian Community Action: Parishes and Partnerships](#), February 2012, p vii)

## 5. Debate: Faith Groups as Public Service Providers

The Big Society agenda has attracted a great deal of attention and scrutiny since 2010. In 2011 the House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration reported on the issue. On the role of faith groups, the Committee said it recognised “the benefits to society of faith groups taking part in the provision of public services” but thought that “while such provision could be encouraged by the Government, this should not be to the exclusion of groups who deliver services across multi-faith and non-religious communities” (House of Commons Select Committee on Public Administration, *The Big Society*, 14 December 2011, HC 902-I of session 2010–12, para 143). Secularists, such as the British Humanist Society (BHS), have stated that the Government’s approach to communities was flawed as community action was too often viewed through the prism of the role played faith groups. This, it argued, excluded a number of other equally-worthy, non-faith groups that also played a social role:

We believe that, rather than making a fetish of faith, social cohesion and other community initiatives must focus on the contribution that all individuals and groups in the community can make. Where there are legitimate reasons for working with communities identified by beliefs, then these must also include humanists and other non-religious people, and we support the involvement of humanists in those circumstances.

(British Humanist Society, [‘Government and ‘Faith’ Communities’](#), accessed 11 November 2013)

It has also been contested that those from faith groups are more likely to volunteer. One academic has suggested that “empirical research into the relationship between religion and social capital remains ambivalent. Although studies indicate a link between volunteering and levels of church attendance, the lines of causality remain unclear. It is not certain, for instance, as to whether church attendance drives volunteering (perhaps by fostering social networks) or whether individuals who are more predisposed to volunteering are more likely to attend church” (Steven Kettell, ‘Thematic Review: Religion and the Big Society: A Match Made in Heaven?’, *Policy & Politics*, 2012, vol 40, pp 281–96). The British Humanist Society has stated that “there are thousands of secular organisations who work tirelessly to improve peoples’ lives at all levels of society. Non-religious people are often taking part in this activity but do not feel the need to do it in the name of being non-religious. Moreover, many non-religious people will also work for and volunteer their time on behalf of organisations and charities with a religious basis. Being less visible than specifically religious contributions to society, this can add to the myth

that non-religious people do less community work” (British Humanist Society, [BHA Briefing 2010: Religion, Belief and Volunteering](#), December 2010, p 1).

The Government has said that there was no special treatment for faith groups and that all groups would be afforded the same opportunities to be service providers. Speaking for the Government in the House of Lords, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon put this position on the record:

It goes without saying that where a charity or a community group is non-religious or indeed atheist by nature, it should stand exactly the same chance as a religious group of winning a commission from a local authority to run a service. If it has the skills and the experience, and can offer value for money, it should get the job.

(HL *Hansard*, 25 July 2013, col [1498](#))

There have also been concerns about whether it was appropriate for public services to be delivered by faith groups when they were subject to the same requirements as public bodies. On this point, the British Humanist Society has said it was wrong to provide contracts for public services to religious organisations that had exemptions from the Equality Act 2010 which could enable discrimination to take place, for example, that “allow religious employers to discriminate against potential applicants for jobs on grounds of religion or belief and of sexual orientation, and to discriminate against current employees on those same grounds in ways such as barring them from promotion or dismissing them” (British Humanist Society, ‘[Public Service Reform](#)’, accessed 11 November 2013). The BHS position therefore was that “no publicly-funded, comprehensive and statutory public service, to which all citizens have an entitlement, should be contracted out to a religious organisation until the law has been changed to protect service users and employees from discrimination” (ibid).

Steven Kettell, of Warwick University, has pointed out the conundrum for Government’s in this area. He said that giving freedom to faith groups contracted to deliver public services— for example to set their own criteria for core operational issues such as recruitment and service provision—could “open up a host of toxic issues” for the Government:

The first horn of the dilemma is that any refusal to allow this on the part of the government will significantly undermine its claims to be seeking a genuine engagement with FBOs [faith-based organisations], heightening concerns surrounding co-option and a loss of institutional integrity and hence dissuading many religiously motivated groups and individuals from becoming involved. Given the government’s emphasis on the centrality of faith-based groups to the Big Society endeavour, any losses in this regard would be seriously damaging to its prospects of success. On the second horn of the dilemma, however, government assent to religiously motivated demands that support reactionary or discriminatory social views, and/or involve exemptions from particular aspects of equalities legislation, also threatens to undermine the Big Society programme.

(Steven Kettell, ‘Thematic Review: Religion and the Big Society: A Match Made in Heaven?’, *Policy & Politics*, 2012, vol 40, pp 281–96)

The Christians in Parliament All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) has also looked at some of the concerns surrounding possible discrimination in service delivery. In its assessment of the relationship between local authorities and faith groups, it found:

There was a repeated concern that faith groups only wanted to provide services or activities or their own faith community. Tamworth Borough Council said: “The mere fact that activities take place within a faith setting will mean that many members of the community will not attend due to a misconception that the event is an attempt to draw them into the faith group.” The survey showed that this perception was not matched by the broad access that was in evidence across the vast range of services provided by faith groups.

Local authorities were often concerned about whether people from other faiths, or from the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] community, would receive equal access to services, and if they did whether they would be able to receive it without restriction. The London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea commented: “Local authorities may also need to be mindful of any religious views that could cause discrimination of service users, for example faith groups that are opposed to homosexuality.”

The APPG concluded that “overwhelmingly, these concerns were more about perceptions than reality”:

The levels of fear raised around discrimination was not matched by accounts of such discrimination taking place. Often those authorities with the best relationships had overcome barriers and concerns by getting to know people within the faith communities rather than making assumptions about beliefs and actions.

(Christians in Parliament, [\*Faith in the Community: Strengthening Ties Between Faith Groups and Local Authorities\*](#), 2013, pp 9–10)

The APPG also heard concerns about faith groups “proselytising” in their work. Its survey revealed that:

Many local authorities raised concerns that faith communities would do what they considered them to be primarily committed to, ie promoting their faith, rather than the service they are commissioned to provide. Rochford District Council said: “A key challenge would be the potential for faith-based groups to use funding for the delivery of services for promoting their faith.”

(p 9)

However, the report believed these fears to be unfounded:

No churches expect local authorities to fund their evangelism, and faith groups generally understand that when in formal partnership their commitment is to provide the service commissioned. This doesn’t mean being silent about faith and beliefs, but it does mean clients and other staff are treated in the same way they would be in any other work context.

(p 9)

Others have agreed with this assessment. Nick Spencer, Research Director at the Christian think tank Theos, observed that many organisations “adopted ‘codes of practice’ whereby volunteers undertook ‘not [to] talk about their faith unless asked to do so by the person whom they are serving.’” He observed that this “has been adopted by the hugely successful Street Pastors initiative, whose volunteers are to be seen outside pubs and clubs across the country every weekend: never initiate a faith conversation; just respond to them. It was also the tactic used by Jesus, whose actions provoked some questions, and much anger, among his contemporaries. It’s not a bad model to follow”. He argued that:

Public money should not be used to evangelise, still less proselytise. But nor should Christians (or any other religious group, for that matter) be required to engage in a kind of secular limbo dance in public, squeezing themselves under some arbitrary bar of “reason” just because “the reasonable” people in society easily do so. Rather, they should be allowed, encouraged, to do what they do for the reasons they do it. This is not only the most fruitful way, refusing to cut off the religious roots that nourish the plant. It’s the most honest way, too.

(Theos, [‘Why Do Christians Bother?’](#), 12 July 2013)

In contrast Terry Sanderson, of the National Secular Society, was sympathetic to councils dealing with faith groups. He stated that “the reason so many councils are suspicious of religious groups is because there is always an agenda attached to their work. They may promise not to proselytise, but the very idea of a Christian organisation providing an essential service is already off-putting to some people”. He argued for local authorities to provide “a legally binding contract that required all organisations working on their behalf—with taxpayers’ money—not to use that money for anything other than what it was provided for, and that ensured services would be available to the whole community without discrimination and without the demand for participation in unrelated activities, such as worship” (National Secular Society, [‘Parliamentary Report Published on Relationship Between Local Authorities and Faith Groups’](#), 10 June 2013). However, a report by the think tank Demos thought that “the Government, local authorities and other funders must not be squeamish or anxious about the faith aspect of faith-motivated service providers: it appears that the majority do not proselytise in an aggressive manner in the context of service delivery. Going further, nor should they demand that faith-based providers not proselytise at all. Critics inevitably cite concerns around proselytising as a reason not to support faith-based providers. The reality is that the concept and act of proselytising is highly varied and subtle” (Demos, [Faithful Providers](#), 2013, p 47).

Responding to a debate on faith groups and local authorities, Mark Prisk, the Minister for Housing, disagreed with the suggestion. He said the Government did not regard it as reasonable for local authorities to impose conditions in contracts with regard to promotion of faith “even though they may legally be at liberty to do so”. He said that he was “not talking about public money paying for specific religious worship—indeed, we all want to ensure that services are open and for a common cause when public money is involved. However, let us face it: the vast majority of church and faith groups are perfectly capable of sticking to those rules. The key point is that people need to be able to be honest about their faith, without necessarily needing to impose it on somebody else. That is the balance that I would encourage councils to consider” (HC *Hansard*, 2 July 2013, col [222WH](#)).

More narrowly there have also been issues raised in connection with the practical issues faith groups have with dealing with central and local government, largely revolving around religious

literacy. Rana Jawad, of the University of Bath, has noted that “some religious groups acknowledge, if not complain, that government officials understand their contribution to society in superficial ways or have little interest in the transformative effects of spiritual faith, since what matters to government are the cost-effective outcome measures” (Rana Jawad, ‘Serving the Public or Delivering Public Services? Religion and Social Welfare in the New British Social Policy Landscape’, *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 2012, vol 20, pp 55–68). The Christians in Parliament APPG looked at this aspect of the relationship between faith groups and local authorities in its report. The APPG found that:

[...] churches have a well of resources that are vitally needed by our communities at this time. They also demonstrate an unparalleled depth of commitment to their communities, and especially those in poverty [...] It is encouraging that many of the local authorities surveyed acknowledged this unique social good, realising that faith groups are intimately connected into communities in ways that they will never be able to, and that they are committed to working with the most vulnerable and hardest to reach.

(Christians in Parliament, [Faith in the Community: Strengthening Ties Between Faith Groups and Local Authorities](#), 2013, p 10)

Demos, however, considered that local authorities could do more in formally recognising the value of faith based service deliverers. It argued that “efficiency should not be the sole measure of which organisations are commissioned or supported to provide services to local communities. Government, local authorities and other funders should consider additional social values when commissioning public service providers”, with possible criteria including consideration of the provider’s connection with an area, such as its history, record of investment and personal relationship with the community (Demos, [Faithful Providers](#), 2013, p 14).

However, a number of barriers were identified by the APPG as getting in the way of productive local authority-faith group relations. Examples given were:

### **When there are capacity problems on both sides.**

Budget cuts have reduced the staff of local authorities, which has lessened their ability to initiate engagement. The facilities and staff time which sometimes ensured it happened are no longer there.

Another capacity problem rests with the faith groups. A number of local authorities had carried out audits of the contribution of churches and Christian charities, identifying the strength of voluntary capacity that exists within the Church. However, it is clear that this capacity is not limitless, and neither is it always best directed. One of the starkest comments came from South Norfolk Council who said: “A recent issue has arisen that Night-stop [a project providing emergency accommodation for young adults] hosts have been unavailable to provide the service that they are volunteering for because they are too busy at church-related meetings, meaning that the money being spent on recruiting and training hosts has been wasted.”

### **When organisational cultures clash.**

Sometimes this was as specific as the need for churches to have sufficient financial and governance structures in place to show that they could be trusted to carry out the

functions the council might be passing onto them. The research showed that there is work to be done in this area, and sometimes the requirements are quite onerous. This is also reflected in the language and culture of local authorities which can at times be very different to that of the Church. Faith groups sometimes have to wade through labyrinthine processes with swathes of acronyms to decode when engaging with their local authority.

(Christians in Parliament, [Faith in the Community: Strengthening Ties Between Faith Groups and Local Authorities](#), 2013, pp 9–10)

Some observers have reflected on the how realistic it is to expect groups to deliver public services on a larger scale. In her study of faith groups and public service delivery Rana Jawad observed that “while religious groups have the ‘heart and passion’ [...] they still lack the resources and practical know-how to write funding proposals, properly account for funds and deliver services on a wide scale. At best, they can act as subcontractors and indeed, some of the larger religious organisations are able to enter into partnerships with large corporate firms, especially in relation to employment-related projects” (Rana Jawad, ‘Serving the Public or Delivering Public Services? Religion and Social Welfare in the New British Social Policy Landscape’, *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice*, 2012, vol 20, pages 55–68). In terms of capacity to deliver on larger scale, Demos warned there were dangers when it came to the possibility of scaling up some successful services provided by faith groups. It said:

Our research suggests that faith provides a strong motivating ethos for service providers across a range of policy areas. Yet there appears to be a tension between this ethos and the size and funding arrangements of faith-based service providers. Faith motivated providers—and their financial supporters—should prioritise the maintenance of their underlying ethos and motivation at the expense of increasing the size and scale of their service provision. Commissioners should not just assume that if a service is successful and well run, it should inevitably be scaled up. Part of the service’s success may be down to the faith ethos, which appears to become diluted the larger and more mainstream a service-providing organisation becomes.

(Demos, [Faithful Providers](#), 2013, pp 46–7)