



BRIEFING PAPER

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The voluntary sector and the Big Society

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Summary

The Prime Minister's concept of a "Big Society" was a much talked about element of the Conservative Party Manifesto of 2010 and then the Coalition's Programme for Government. The concept involves three main strands:

- opening up public services – enabling voluntary organisations, charities, and social enterprises to compete to offer public services
- social action – encouraging and enabling people to play a more active part in society
- community empowerment – giving local councils and neighbourhoods more power to take decisions and shape their area

Subsequent policy developments included the introduction of a National Citizen Service, the setting up of Big Society Capital, a renewed Compact agreement, and measures to improve the voluntary sector's role in providing public services.

The "Big Society" also featured in the Conservative Manifesto of 2015; this referred to:

- a new workplace entitlement to Volunteering Leave for three days a year
- a guaranteed place on the National Citizen Service for young people

A January 2015 "Big Society Audit" by Civil Exchange argued that while there had been some "genuinely positive initiatives", the Big Society had not reached those who needed it most – those with least power and influence. The then Government said the report did not fairly reflect the "significant progress" that had been made.

This note provides further background to the Big Society; the role of the voluntary and community sector; some of the Government's initiatives; and a selection of comment.

1. What is the Big Society?

Some of the key themes of the Prime Minister's "Big Society" concept can be traced back to his first speech as Conservative Party leader in December 2005.¹ In this speech, David Cameron spoke of "mend[ing] our broken society", commenting that "there is such a thing as society, it's just not the same thing as the state" – a reference to Mrs Thatcher's remark in September 1987 that "there is no such thing as society".²

Mr Cameron said that he wanted to "set free the voluntary sector and social enterprises to deal with the linked problems that blight so many of our communities" and to reform public services. These ideas were repeated over the following years.

In his speech to the Conservative Party conference in October 2009, Mr Cameron spoke of the failings of "big government", of how it undermined "the personal and social responsibility that should be the lifeblood of a strong society", and of the need for "a stronger society...stronger communities... all by rebuilding responsibility."³

These ideas went on to form the basis of the "Build the Big Society" section of the Conservative Party Manifesto of 2010:

Our alternative to big government is the Big Society: 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.

The Big Society runs consistently through our policy programme. Our plans to reform public services, mend our broken society, and rebuild trust in politics are all part of our Big Society agenda. These plans involve redistributing power from the state to society; from the centre to local communities, giving people the opportunity to take more control over their lives.⁴

The same ideas were set out in the Coalition's [Programme for Government](#) of May 2010.

¹ ["Cameron victory speech"](#), *BBC News online*, 6 December 2005 [accessed 13 August 2015]

² ["Interview for Woman's Own"](#), 23 September 1987, Margaret Thatcher Foundation website [accessed 13 August 2015]

³ "Putting Britain back on her feet", David Cameron speech, 8 October 2009

⁴ Conservative Party, *Invitation to join the government of Britain*, April 2010, p37

2. Coalition policy

Building the Big Society

The Coalition Government set up the Office for Civil Society (OCS) in May 2010.⁵ The OCS replaced the Office of the Third Sector at the Cabinet Office.

A short paper - [Building the Big Society](#) - was published in May 2010 and said that the Government would:

- encourage volunteering and involvement in social action
- encourage charitable giving and philanthropy
- introduce a National Citizen Service for 16 year olds
- support the creation and expansion of mutuals, co-operatives, charities and social enterprises, and support their greater involvement in the running of public services
- use funds from dormant bank accounts to establish a Big Society Bank to provide new finance for neighbourhood groups, charities, and social enterprises⁶

The paper was followed by a more detailed [strategy document](#) in October 2010.⁷ A [consultation paper](#) on supporting civil society and how the Government could “best play a role to support building infrastructure” was published at the same time.⁸ The consultation received around 500 responses⁹ and “informed subsequent policy developments.”¹⁰

The Spending Review of 20 October 2010 announced £470 million to support the work of the OCS. This included £100 million for a Transition Fund to provide short-term support for voluntary sector organisations providing public services.¹¹ Plans for a Big Society Bank were also set out.¹²

The role of the voluntary and community sector

In an October 2010 House of Lords [debate](#) on the charitable sector, Lord Taylor of Holbeach, the then Government spokesperson for the Cabinet Office, provided some background to the Government’s thinking on the role of the voluntary and community sector (VCS) in the Big Society. He claimed that civil society was not as developed as it could be and that there was an over-dependence on the state:

(...) While the Government have for a long time aimed to support the voluntary and community sector, I am not convinced that their actions have really been conducive to strengthening civil society.

⁵ [“Nick Hurd appointed Minister for Civil Society”](#), Cabinet Office press release, 18 May 2010

⁶ Cabinet Office, [Building the Big Society](#), May 2010, pp2-3

⁷ Cabinet Office, [Building a stronger civil society](#), October 2010

⁸ Cabinet Office, [Supporting a stronger civil society](#), October 2010, p3

⁹ [HC Deb 4 April 2011 c668W](#)

¹⁰ John Plummer, [“Office for Civil Society ‘ignores responses to consultations’ says charity chief”](#), Third Sector online, 1 March 2012

¹¹ HM Treasury, [Spending Review 2010](#), October 2010, p35

¹² *Ibid*, p35

In recent years, the state has taken a bigger and more interventionist role in society, thus increasing the burden of bureaucracy and removing decision-making from local communities. Not only has this stifled local initiative and enthusiasm, it has led to an overdependence on the state.

(...) This Government are committed to reversing the trend and to supporting civil society to grow and to flourish as an independent force for good. The big society agenda is about giving power back to individuals, families, communities and groups, turning government upside-down so that society, not the state, is in the driving seat.¹³

A cover for cuts?

In February 2011, the Prime Minister gave a speech in which he responded to criticisms of the Big Society. On claims that it was a cover for cuts, he said:

It [the Big Society] is not a cover for anything. It is a good thing to try and build a bigger and stronger society, whatever is happening to public spending. But I would make this argument: whoever was standing here right now as Prime Minister would be having to make cuts in public spending, and isn't it better if we are having to make cuts in public spending, to try and encourage a bigger and stronger society at the same time?

(...) Then there are the people who say, 'Maybe it is not a cover for cuts, but the cuts will make building a bigger society much more difficult.' What I would say to that is: of course, there is no area that can be really immune from the public spending problems that we face, but...we are actually doing things to try and make a bigger society more possible. We are setting up a Big Society Bank, and we are putting £200 million into it from the banks this week..."¹⁴

Policy initiatives

Some policy strands relating to the VCS and the Big Society are summarised below.

Useful overviews of Coalition policy relating to [social action](#), [social enterprise](#), and [social investment](#) were published in May 2015.

Modernising commissioning

A December 2010 [consultation paper](#) explained how the Government would take forward the commitments in the Coalition Programme to support the creation and expansion of mutuals, co-operatives, charities and social enterprises, and enable these groups to have a greater involvement in the running of public services.¹⁵ This was followed by a [white paper](#) in July 2011.¹⁶

¹³ [HL Deb 5 October 2010 c20](#)

¹⁴ ["The Big Society"](#), David Cameron speech, 14 February 2011 [accessed 13 August 2015]

¹⁵ Cabinet Office, [Modernising commissioning: increasing the role of charities, social enterprises, mutuals and cooperatives in public service delivery](#), December 2010

¹⁶ HM Government, [Open public services](#), July 2011

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Progress reports of December 2012¹⁷ and March 2014¹⁸ set out what had been achieved in supporting “intelligent commissioning”; making the VCS more competitive; and increasing opportunities for civil society in the provision of public services.

National Citizen Service

The National Citizen Service (NCS) is a voluntary programme open to 15 to 17-year-olds. It is designed to encourage personal and social development by working on skills like leadership, teamwork and communication. The NCS runs outside of term time in spring, summer and autumn and involves a number of phases: induction events; team activities; and time away from home developing a social action project to help the community. More than 135,000 young people have now participated.¹⁹

An Ipsos MORI evaluation of the NCS 2013 programmes reported that a large majority of participants enjoyed the experience, that they found the NCS worthwhile, and that they would recommend it to others. The evaluation also found that the NCS had positive impacts in relation to social mixing; transition to adulthood; teamwork, communication and leadership; and community involvement.²⁰

A Cabinet Office [publication](#) of August 2015 gives details of NCS participants by local authority region from 2011 to spring 2015.²¹

Further information on the NCS is available in a Library [Briefing Paper](#).²²

Big Society Capital

Big Society Capital, originally called the Big Society Bank, was launched in April 2012.²³ According to parliamentary responses, over £150 million of new money has since been made available to the third sector.²⁴

Further information on Big Society Capital can be found on its [website](#).

New Compact agreement

The Compact was introduced by the Labour Government in 1998 and set out the principles underpinning the relationship between the VCS and the Government.

A new Compact agreement was published in December 2010.²⁵ According to the foreword, this is “shorter and more tightly focused on outcomes and practical commitments;” the latter are based around the following outcomes:

- a strong, diverse and independent civil society

¹⁷ HM Government, [Making it easier for civil society to work with the state: progress update](#), December 2012

¹⁸ HM Government, [Making it easier for civil society to work with the state: progress update](#), March 2014

¹⁹ Cabinet Office, [National Citizen Service participation data](#), 7 August 2015

²⁰ Ipsos MORI, [National Citizen Service 2013: evaluation](#), August 2014

²¹ Cabinet Office, [National Citizen Service participation data](#), 7 August 2015

²² [The National Citizen Service \(SN/HA/6364\)](#)

²³ [“Prime Minister launches Big Society Capital”](#), Cabinet Office news release, 1 April 2012

²⁴ [HC Deb 2 September 2014 c22WH](#) and [HC Deb 25 June 2014 cc303-4](#)

²⁵ Cabinet Office, [The Compact](#), December 2010

- effective and transparent design and development of policies, programmes and public services
- responsive and high-quality programmes and services
- clear arrangement for managing changes to programmes and services
- an equal and fair society

The agreement is accompanied by an accountability and transparency guide.²⁶

Responsibility for overseeing the Compact is shared between the OCS and [Compact Voice](#).²⁷

A National Audit Office (NAO) report of January 2012 concluded that government departments needed to improve their implementation of the Compact and made a number of recommendations for all departments to consider. The report also said that the Cabinet Office should do more in its oversight of the Compact and made related recommendations.²⁸

A follow-up report of January 2015 said that departments had made slow progress in implementing the NAO's recommendations. The OCS was found to have shown a continuing commitment to the Compact and made good progress in implementing the NAO recommendations. However, since the closure of the Compact Advocacy Programme in 2013, it was unclear how the OCS would monitor the level and nature of Compact complaints to gauge the level of compliance across government.²⁹

Community Life Survey

The Cabinet Office commissioned the first Community Life Survey in 2012 to provide official statistics on issues that are "key to encouraging social action and empowering communities, including volunteering, giving, community engagement and well-being".³⁰ Further detail can be found on the Gov.UK [website](#).³¹

²⁶ Cabinet Office, [The Compact Accountability and Transparency Guide](#), December 2010

²⁷ Oversight of the Compact was previously the responsibility of the Commission for the Compact (established in April 2007 as a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Office of the Third Sector); the Commission closed in March 2011

²⁸ National Audit Office, [Central government's implementation of the national Compact](#), January 2012

²⁹ National Audit Office, [Central government's implementation of the national Compact: a follow-up](#), January 2015, p8

³⁰ ["Community Life Survey 2013-14"](#), Cabinet Office Statistical Press Release, 22 July 2014

³¹ Gov.UK website, [Community Life Survey](#) [accessed 13 August 2015]

3. Government policy

The [Conservative Manifesto 2015](#) included a section “Helping you build the Big Society” which said that a Conservative Government would, amongst other things:

- guarantee your child a place on National Citizen Service, so they can learn new skills and meet young people from different walks of life
- give those who work for a big company and the public sector a new workplace entitlement to Volunteering Leave for three days a year, on full pay³²

On 25 June 2015 Rob Wilson, Minister for Civil Society, gave a [speech](#) in which he spoke of the need for:

- a confident and capable voluntary sector, “armed with the skills it needs to meet the challenges ahead”
- more social action and volunteering, with community participation “embedded in our lives from school days onwards”
- increased levels of giving, and more social investment, “helping people who want to use their money to transform lives to connect to organisations who can put those funds to work”
- stronger, more resilient, more capable and more empowered communities³³

Youth Social Action Fund

In July 2015 a £1 million Youth Social Action Fund was announced to help organisations working with young people in lower socioeconomic areas in England.³⁴ Further detail on the Fund is available [online](#).³⁵

³² [Conservative Party Manifesto 2015](#), p45

³³ [“Building civil society together: Rob Wilson speech”](#), Gov.UK, 25 June 2015

³⁴ [“New funding announced to increase government support for youth social action”](#), Cabinet Office news, 14 July 2015

³⁵ [“Applications open for Youth Social Action Fund”](#), Cabinet Office news, 28 July 2015

4. Comment

Early comment

In a June 2010 [briefing](#), the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) welcomed ideas for devolved decision making, arguing that this was “an important step toward reducing the local democratic deficit, and truly engaging with people.”³⁶ It noted, however, that it would be important for local authorities to work effectively and in partnership with the VCS. The briefing also welcomed the enhanced role that the sector would have in the provision of public services, before cautioning that this was just one of the roles that the sector plays:

To bring a lasting transformation in public services and build the ‘Big Society’, VCOs must also be able to carry out their full range of roles, including identifying needs, designing solutions and giving service users the information, advice and support they need to make informed choices.³⁷

The New Economics Foundation noted the “progressive potential” of the Big Society while raising concerns about social justice, the impact of spending cuts, and the dangers of a “shrinking state”.³⁸

Other commentators expressed concern about the impact that deficit reduction measures could have on plans for a Big Society. In the *Guardian*, for example, Anna Coote said:

(...) Democratic government is the only effective vehicle for ensuring that resources are fairly distributed, both across the population and between individuals and groups at local levels. Businesses or third-sector organisations can supplement these functions but cannot replace them, not least because they invariably serve sectoral or specialised interests, rather than those of the nation as a whole. If the state is pruned so drastically that it is neither big enough nor strong enough to carry them out, the effect will be a more troubled and diminished society, not a bigger one.³⁹

In a paper published by the British Academy, Anne Power noted that there were “historic precedents” for recognising the Big Society as part of a tradition of community organisation and social movements.⁴⁰ She argued that communities and the state were interdependent: while the “Big Society” could help to address inequality, social breakdown and environmental issues through widespread citizen participation, the state had a key role in providing the framework for action – including funding – and ensuring fairness on behalf of all citizens.⁴¹

³⁶ NCVO, [Briefing on the Big Society](#), June 2010, p3 [accessed 13 August 2015]

³⁷ *Ibid*, p4

³⁸ New Economics Foundation, [Cutting it: The ‘Big Society’ and the new austerity](#), November 2010, p3

³⁹ [“Cameron’s ‘big society’ will leave the poor and powerless behind”](#), *Guardian*, 19 July 2010; see also [“The ‘big society’ is a big fat lie – just follow the money”](#), *Guardian*, 6 August 2010

⁴⁰ Anne Power, [The ‘Big Society’ and concentrated neighbourhood problems](#), British Academy, August 2012, p57

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p21

David Halpern of the Institute for Government said that the Big Society could unlock the “hidden wealth” of communities, arguing that much of our lives was characterized by “non-market reciprocity”. The relevance of this for public services was that “when you look across the world at innovations in public services that have improved outcomes, and yet reduced costs...they have a common theme”:

In almost all cases, they have found a way of harnessing the latent capacities of citizens and communities. Viewed through the lens of this hidden wealth, many big and expensive social problems—like care for the elderly—start to look far more tractable...the big society...has the potential to shine a powerful and important light on resources and ways of thinking that traditional public service debates, and much of economics, have often neglected.⁴²

Later comment

Towards the end of the Coalition Government, some commentators and politicians⁴³ asked what had happened to the Big Society. According to a *Guardian* article in January 2015, the Prime Minister had not used the phrase since December 2013.⁴⁴ In May 2014, Oliver Letwin told an Institute for Government event that “Big Society” was used less frequently within Government “in deference to our Liberal colleagues.”⁴⁵ He said that he cared more about policies and progress than “descriptions” and that mutualisation and payment by results for volunteer groups were “fundamental components of the Big Society”.

In response to a parliamentary question claiming that the Big Society had failed, the Government said that “cynics” were “entirely wrong”:

Some of the changes we have introduced are irreversible, not least in terms of giving communities more power and information, which they are not going to give back. We recognise that charities are going through a very difficult time, like lots of organisations, but this Government are actively supporting them to help them to adapt and improve their resilience...⁴⁶

The then Government also pointed to a rise in volunteering, participation in the National Citizen Service, and the increased role of the VCS in public services:

(...) Volunteering is up 6% since 2010 and 80,000 young people have taken part in National Citizen Service since 2011, contributing over 2 million hours of social action to their local communities.

The Localism Act has resulted in over 1,200 assets of community value being listed and we have helped 150 organisations to acquire a community asset or obtain significant investment towards doing so. More than 900 neighbourhood planning areas have been designated, and all 28 plans which have reached

⁴² David Halpern, “[Give the Big Society a break](#)”, *Prospect magazine*, 24 August 2010; The [Institute for Government](#) website states that it is “an independent charity working to increase government effectiveness

⁴³ See [HL Deb 27 February 2014 c1006](#); [HC Deb 30 April 2014 c807](#); and [HL Deb 4 November 2014 c1570](#)

⁴⁴ “[Why the ‘big society’ is now just a hashtag for coalition hypocrisy](#)”, *Guardian*, 20 January 2015

⁴⁵ “[Oliver Letwin: Why we don't say Big Society any more](#)”, *Guardian*, 14 May 2014

⁴⁶ [HC Deb 30 April 2014 c807](#)

referendum so far have passed with significant majorities in favour.

This Government is committed to opening up public services so that social enterprises and voluntary organisations can play an increased role in delivering local services...⁴⁷

Civil Exchange's Big Society Audit

In January 2015, Civil Exchange⁴⁸ published its final Big Society Audit. While noting some "genuinely positive initiatives", the report argued that the Big Society had failed to deliver against its original goals:

Attempts to create more social action, to empower communities and to open up public services, with some positive exceptions, have not worked. The Big Society has not reached those who need it most. We are more divided than before.⁴⁹

The report set out a number of actions that it believed any future government should take to create a "genuine" Big Society "owned by wider civil society [and] actively involving those with least power and influence":

- replace the market-based, public sector management model that has dominated the thinking of successive governments with a collaborative one
- share and devolve more power
- target support where it is most needed
- collaboration with civil society to mobilise wider social forces
- a fundamental change in the role business plays ie working effectively in communities and with people for common aims⁵⁰

The Cabinet Office said the Civil Exchange report did not fairly reflect "the significant progress made" on initiatives such as the National Citizen Service, Big Society Capital, public service mutuals and asset transfer to the sector:

We remain committed to unlocking the power of a bigger, stronger society as part of our long term plan for the economy and we can already demonstrate a strong track record of delivering this.

Volunteering and charitable giving are up and there has been an unprecedented drive to devolve power and money to local communities.⁵¹

⁴⁷ [HL1567 \[written question on localism and the Big Society\]](#), answered 11 August 2014; See also [HL Deb 27 February 2014 c1006-7](#); See also HM Government, [The Coalition: together in the national interest - mid-term review](#), January 2013, pp33-4

⁴⁸ [Civil Exchange](#) describes itself as a think tank "that exists to help government and the voluntary sector work better together"

⁴⁹ Civil Exchange, [Whose society? The Final Big Society Audit](#), January 2015, p4

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Quoted in ["Big Society has failed, concludes Civil Exchange"](#), Civil Society News, 20 January 2015

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