

Notes from the Big Society Discussion- 14th September 2010

The Big Society event was attended by approximately 50 delegates from across the Voluntary and Community Sector. Delegates were arranged into thematic groups with the following points raised:

Sharing knowledge

- Issues with transparency, not always clear at each stage of process
- Accountability
- Little feedback/analysis of monitoring info – what happens to all our monitoring information?
- In terms of showing your worth as a voluntary and community organisation, working with vulnerable people can often take more time but may show less impact- how is this addressed in terms of outcomes based commissioning?
- Camden LINK will be replaced by Health Watch- fixed funding until 2011- has already had a direct affect on communities
- What will the direction of the voluntary and community sector be now and how do we safeguard good practice.

Q1 Threats

Issues around volunteering

- Big Society is an attempt to replace paid staff with unpaid volunteers
- Volunteers cannot do everything and there is need for specialist staff and experts.
- Safeguarding and protection issues seem to have been overlooked with the coming army of volunteers to run and do everything
- People may not have the time or incentive to volunteer
- Those who may volunteer may have more time on their hands and can afford to volunteer- will the same people do all the volunteering?
- Role of volunteers- assumptions/cost/numbers/professionalism/skills
- Will volunteers end up working in 'local' organisations or be swallowed up into larger, private companies
- Different sectors have different ideas about what volunteering entails

Issues around contracts

- Merging boroughs- how would this fit with awarding contracts? What about jobs and salaries
- There will be fewer, yet larger contracts which brings a threat to local smaller organisations with a loss of local identity
- Big Society agenda should not be a political tactic to rid the community of needed services and replace with private corporations
- Important structures that are in place might be destroyed before the current regime 'knows better'

- It is confused and vague and shows a fundamental lack of understanding about how the voluntary and community sector engages and the vital work it does
- Encourages voluntary and community sector groups to compete against each other to bid for contracts

Issues around partnerships

- Are smaller organisations ready for partnerships?
- Will organisations lose their identity to funders?
- How will partnerships help bids?
- Hard for smaller organisations to join up with larger private firms. Private firms have more resources and may not be willing to share with smaller organisations- how can smaller organisations working at a local level compete?
- Costs involved and financial management of bringing organisations together in partnership/consortia
- Difficult and biggest risk for smaller organisations
- Only options for BME groups is to collaborate/partner up in alliance

Issues around finance & resources

- Big Society is a way to cut resources (funds) indeed the context of Big Society is massive cuts in council spending
- Justifying ourselves all boils down to money
- Payment by results might lead to demands that cannot be met (hard and fast demands) also what is an acceptable 'result' or indicator of delivery.
- What about money for training, time, and it makes a mockery of monitoring and evaluation practices in place
- Services for vulnerable members of community will come under threat
- Crisis looming about accessing services, reduction of jobs etc
- Community centre funding cut - it's time consuming to seek funding, constant bidding takes up time
- How do we maintain front line organisations and services?
- How will funding opportunities work in the Big Society?
- Centralised procurement?
- Reduction of middle management
- Lack of voluntary and community sector ownership of assets- hasn't been addressed in new Big Society agenda
- Severity of cuts whilst simultaneously losing funding will increase pressure on the VCS

Issues around interest

- How big is society really? Do people especially care about the community beyond their street or borough and also about members of society that might be deemed a nuisance and anti-social.
- When people lose their jobs will their appetite for Big Society still be there
- Do people really care that much about the community- do they want that level of involvement?
- Will people be frogmarched into community service?

- 'Community organisers' may be parachuted in from outside regions- local people should be recruited from the communities to which they'll serve. They need to be fit for purpose i.e. living and working locally.

Issues around coherence

- Government has to find out how things are done but the onus is now on the voluntary and community sector justify itself
- No frameworks for executing Big Society and those that are there are naïve and made up from trial and error.
- No evidence as yet from trial areas
- Confusion and ambiguity- no clarity about what is expected
- Lack of coherence from central government
- No coherence from voluntary and community sector back to central government in the public domain- never hear that much about the voluntary and community sector in mainstream news
- Confusion- not sure where to go
- Will examples of best practice be listened to if they don't fit with the current agenda?
- Delivery of services is a problem - seems theoretical at present

Issues around cohesion

- Unequal opportunities exist across communities
- Health services - may create concentration of specialised services in certain areas where others are deprived
- Shift of service users will be from poor / needy to those with money who can afford to pay
- Big Society is about creating service on the cheap. It's not just about the cost!!! Quality and accessibility are equally as important
- Conflict of interest - sourcing income for own salary rather than needs of communities
- Big Society may increase concerns about personal well being rather than the needs of the community
- Will BS serve people it was intended for?
- Does the business model for social enterprise work well? Will it undermine current working organisations? People like business models
 - Some people like business model others not so keen, some have been forced to adopt that structure
 - Often get strapped down with looking for funding as opposed to work on the ground
 - Unstable

Q2 Opportunities

Rebranding the VCS

- Our time to band together and rediscover our value
- Use this opportunity to rebrand and 'sell' the value of the voluntary and community sector
- A time to teach the government what we are about
- A time to look at our weakness and address them (not being able to sell or justify with evidence and case studies ourselves, partnership working weakness).
- Opportunity for society to be transformed through the ideas of Big Society

Expertise and unique selling point

- Political agenda is an attack on public services and voluntary and community sector should not be seen as complicit in this = opportunity to rebrand the sector
- Voluntary and community sector are experts in community development (services / knowledge of community etc). The government lacks expertise in this therefore this one is of sector's unique selling points

Delivery

- A case can be made for Big Society if in practice it delivers on its glorious aims e.g. handing power back to community. However is this really what it is about?
- Cohesion should underpin everything but need to ensure equality. Not the same people dominating- how will the 'pie' be divided?
- Less red tape and bureaucracy
- Maintain infrastructure so small groups can operate - links in to sharing knowledge and capacity building
- Targeted bidding

Collaboration

- More joint working for voluntary and community sector
- Some opportunity to be found for the work of voluntary and community organisations
- Opportunity to exchange services / premises etc such as Camden Shares. This concept is underused and should be explored.
- By increasing diversity and moving resources, services could be more accessible to hard to reach communities
- Voluntary and community sector can determine local indicators and decide needs e.g. poverty indicators
- Voluntary and community sector could be major partners in the 'Civil Society'- should use this opportunity to move the agenda forward through organisations such as VAC, BME Alliance, VCC, CAB Community Centres etc
- Partnerships- could they empower groups? Building strong consortia may enable VCS to face challenges with more strength. Would need effective training to manage partnership working

Finance

- Philanthropy - community activists encourage business to give £££
- Involve local business
- Are loans an option for voluntary and community groups - how do we pay them back?

Q 3 Developing ideas

- Secure our survival first (work with Big Society)
- Protecting charitable status
- Listen to what Camden wants
- Ask government what they want the sector to do and provide resources to do so e.g. money from banks to save voluntary and community sector having to do own bidding

- Turn this round and make the government (coalition) justify the whole Big Society idea and how they aim to make it workable
- Roll out Big Society agenda in stages
- Voluntary and community sector can play a scrutiny role with regards the whole Big Society
- This could be a new arena for a newly rebranded sector if we get it right

Partnership

- It makes for competitiveness and creativeness (partnership working)
- Partnership work and consortium work and the need to match work ethos and work culture before doing partnership work
- Working in consortium could help smaller groups stay afloat by pulling together and moving forward
- Should third sector join up with unions to strengthen their political voice and lobbying capabilities? Or would they lose their voice?
- Organisations may not be tied to contracts therefore more flexibility
- Community Centres work together, albeit on different topics
- Working across boroughs

Volunteering

- Challenges of working with volunteers- will it be easier to get funding? Different services require different kinds of volunteering skills
- Time off from work for volunteering?
- Can encourage volunteering by giving incentives
- May bring grassroots issues to attention more

Collaboration

- Developing the idea of 'sharing' resources and skills between organisations
- Sharing resources - need a borough wide map of what is already available. What is owned? What can be disposed of to generate income?
- Share information

- Share resources
- We cannot set up unrealistic projects no matter what the pressure is.
- Location of services- accessibility
- Community learning ambassadors- ££ from BLF? To raise grassroots issues
- Personalisation isn't being adopted- people need more information

Business

- Link voluntary sector in to the business community
- Opened up discussions about philanthropy
- Social Enterprises- what's the definition? Should they be charging for services? Profit full cost-recovery?

Q4 Deciding what is needed

- How is this going to pan out as there is vagueness? We need more events and meetings and other ways of keeping local voluntary and community groups up to date, and quickly
 - The process of getting into Big Society isn't clear (the briefings were said to be on invitation which excluded a whole host of groups)
 - Big Society is too vague and more specific details needed.
 - Lack of information - need more definitions, greater transparency
 - Effective training to manage partnership working
 - More networking / partnerships
 - Maintain diversity across the borough
 - Need to get the base rules right a sector
 - Outlining examples of current bad practice - identifying what we know already doesn't work as well as feeding in good practice
 - Need structure to support sustainability
-
- List of pertinent questions to address voluntary and community sector concerns
 - Creating an action plan to rebrand voluntary and community sector for civil society
 - Do our own impact quality assessments
 - Weekly / fortnightly / monthly health check on the local sector - which organisations have folded, who's joined up in partnership etc. This would help to build better idea of what's going on with the sector and to measure the impact of implemented changes
-
- More consultation is needed
 - Talk to member users about impact of cuts
 - Get the Big Society debate out to wider audiences within the community using conduits such as VAC, CAB, VCC, community centres etc
 - Involve banks / business / celebs in discussions to offer their expertise
 - Role for VAC - to bring partnerships together



Examples of best practice:

Lot's of projects from across Camden have already demonstrated their positive impact

- CCEN - walkers and talkers within local community
- Community health messengers
- Health and safety- protecting vulnerable people
- Mental health network
- Good neighbourhood schemes had 'sharing best practice days'