



Cass Business School
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BIG SOCIETY, CUTS & CONSEQUENCES: A THINKPIECE

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CONTENTS

	Summary	3
1.	The Focus of this paper	4
2.	Understanding the Big Society	5
3.	What does the Big Society replace?	9
4.	Putting the Big Society in place	11
5.	The unintended and unforeseen consequences of the spending cuts	13
6.	Some of the big issues	19
7.	The case for evaluating the Big Society	21
8.	Methodological issues	23
9.	A matter of criteria	24
10.	Less Ambridge, more strategy	26
	About the author and Cass Centre for Charity Effectiveness (Cass CCE)	28

Big Society, cuts and consequences: a thinkpiece

Summary

This thinkpiece is addressed to decision makers and opinion formers in public policy and in the third sector. It presents a personal perspective draws on available evidence, extensive debate around the value of the Big Society and personal insights gained through consultancy practice. The paper seeks to frame this debate in terms of the unintended or inadequately foreseen consequences of public expenditure cuts on the aspirations attached to the Big Society.

The demands on Big Society should be seen through the prism of the deep cuts in public expenditure currently being implemented by the Coalition Government. Big Society is a loose but significant idea in shaping social action and the services that people and communities need and generate. Big Society is not divorced from the existing activities of the third sector.

One of the tests of Big Society and associated policies is whether they enhance or weaken the capacity of the third sector to deliver public benefit. The deep cuts have profound implications for the ability of civic and social action – with third sector organisations at their heart - to operate effectively and deliver for people and communities. Big Society has to be seen as an untested social experiment that requires to be evaluated objectively and independently using a broad range of social and economic indicators.

The third sector has some mutual interest with Government in ensuring that Big Society is given the opportunity to be realised. However, the implementation of Big Society needs to take on ever more practical, strategic and operational form in place of pre-election rhetoric.

Big Society, cuts and consequences: a thinkpiece

'Of all the things he [Cameron] said in the run-up to the election, it [Big Society] is the only one that has stuck as part of the political debate and the political consciousness'

Alastair Campbell blog, 20 September 2010¹

1. The focus of this paper

This thinkpiece is addressed to decision makers and opinion formers in public policy and in the third sector. It presents a personal perspective draws on available evidence, extensive debate around the value of the Big Society and personal insights gained through consultancy practice.

This thinkpiece considers:

- the arguments over what is Big Society and what it may replace;
- the unintended or inadequately foreseen consequences of deep cuts in public expenditure on aspirations of Big Society to be delivered by third sector organisations;
- how the achievement of Big Society might be evaluated.

The deep cuts in public expenditure considered in this paper are those announced since the Coalition Government took office in May 2010. The Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) announced on 20 October 2010 has been the most important statement of public expenditure cuts. In addition, the Government set out savings of nearly £6 billion shortly after taking office and also a significant cull of Non Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) - although it is uncertain what savings this latter action has brought to the public purse. Various announcements and leaks in the period leading up to the CSR have provided more details on specific cuts.

The thinkpiece concentrates on the issues of Big Society in England, recognising that there are significant domestic powers and different public policies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and that the promotion and practice of Big Society has been primarily directed to an English audience.

¹ Alastair Campbell was Director of Communications at 10 Downing Street 1997-2003

2. Understanding the Big Society

'If you talk about the small state, people think you're Attila the Hun. If you talk about the big society, people think you're Mother Teresa'

David Davis, senior Conservative MP²

The Big Society is a loose but significant idea in shaping individual and social action and the services that people and communities need and generate. Big Society has been variously described as:

- The Conservative Party's 'big idea' following the invitation to people to join in the Government of Britain. The Conservative Party Manifesto for the 2010 General Election declared: "the change we offer is from big Government to Big Society."³;
- Cover for major cuts in public expenditure - Dr. John Sentamu, Archbishop of York, described the Comprehensive Spending Review as "the swinging axe that follows the cuddly blanket and soothing words of 'The Big Society'"⁴;
- Clever public relations repositioning the Conservative Party – In an interview on 2 May 2010, Nick Clegg said: "What is this big society? It is a big society with a price tag attached....What is emerging has always been there, which is a well-oiled PR machine, but basically disguising fake change. It's hollow. There's nothing in it."⁵;
- A confused idea stemming in part from the multiple origins of the ideas about the Big Society (David Cameron's Hugo Young Lecture 2009; Philip Blond, Red Tory, Republica and the influence of G.K. Chesterton; Iain Duncan Smith and Centre for Social Justice)⁶;

² Quoted in Financial Times, 23 July 2010

³ Conservative Party Manifesto, 2010 General Election

⁴ Statement by Dr. John Sentamu, Archbishop of York, Ekklesia, 21 October 2010

⁵ Quoted in the Evening Standard, 2 May 2010

⁶ For a critical perspective, see Jonathan Raban, Cameron's Crank: a review of Philip Blond's Red Tory, London Review of Books, 22 April 2010

- An unrealistic dream for which families and individuals lack the time (a capacity and incentive argument) – Professor Tony Wright wrote: “It is not enough to withdraw the state and expect ‘society’ to take on its tasks (and presumably, to blame society if it fails to rise to the challenge)...We start from a long way back and people will not all become citizen-activists overnight, nor should they. At a practical level, people are busy parenting, working and caring, often struggling to keep afloat; they will only have time and energy for civic activity if good support systems are in place, and if the activity itself seems worthwhile.”⁷.

The Big Society first attracted wide prominence in the 2010 General Election campaign. Feedback suggests that the Big Society was a difficult idea to explain on the doorstep⁸. Notwithstanding these problems, continuing references to the Big Society, notably in the Coalition Government statement in May on the Big Society⁹, and the Prime Minister’s Liverpool speech in July¹⁰, indicate the resilience of the idea and, more importantly, the commitment of those expounding it.

However, the Big Society was absent from the emergency budget speech of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and also from the 112 page budget document¹¹. There was only one reference to the Big Society in the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s lengthy statement to the House of Commons presenting the Comprehensive Spending Review¹². Perhaps to be taken as an explanation of this, New Philanthropy Capital observes that charities do only represent 2% of Government funding.¹³

As presented by the Conservatives, the idea of Big Society can be seen as having the following underlying characteristics:

⁷ Tony Wright – Where Next? The Challenge for Centre-Left Politics, IPPR September 2010

⁸ A common theme in analysis of the 2010 General Election; see for example PR Week, 21 July 2010

⁹ Building The Big Society, Coalition Government statement on the Big Society, 18 May 2010

¹⁰ David Cameron Liverpool speech, 19 July 2010, accessed on Number 10 website

¹¹ Social Enterprise, 22 June 2010

¹² Chancellor of the Exchequer’s statement on the Comprehensive Spending Review, 20 October 2010

¹³ New Philanthropy Capital – Preparing For the Cuts, 2010

- Increased social responsibilities for individuals and families with policies that nudge people in a particular direction; ‘our ambition is for every adult in the country to be a member of an active community group’¹⁴
- Localism – power decentralised to the lowest possible level including empowering communities to take over local amenities such as parks and libraries that are under threat¹⁵ ;
- Greater responsibility for civil society and a focus on the ‘little platoons’¹⁶ undertaking social action projects – ‘a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities’¹⁷;
- A smaller national and local State with the consequent need for lower taxes and with State monopolies being broken. Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities, told Radio 4’s World at One: ‘Even at a time when money is tight, it is still possible to find different ways of delivering. It is unashamedly about getting more for less.’¹⁸ In his 19 July speech, the Prime Minister spoke of fostering a culture of philanthropy and voluntarism¹⁹;
- Increased accountability of Government including a right to know and a right to data²⁰;
- Some greater sphere (or burden) of activity being undertaken by the third sector and wider civil society; ‘our public service programme will enable social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups to play a leading role in delivering public services and tackling deep-rooted social problems’²¹ ;

¹⁴ Conservative Party Manifesto, 2010 General Election

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ ‘To love the little platoon we belong to in society is the first principle of public affection.’ Edmund Burke, conservative philosopher; see David Marquand’s article on Burke – The patron saint of the Big Society, Prospect, 5 October 2010

¹⁷ Conservative Party Manifesto, 2010 General Election

¹⁸ Cited in The Guardian, 19 July 2010

¹⁹ David Cameron’s Liverpool speech, 19 July 2010, accessed on the Number 10 website

²⁰ Greg Clark, Communities Minister, speech on 28 July 2010

²¹ Conservative Party Manifesto, 2010 General Election

- Reform of the planning system²².

Conservative rhetoric around Big Society has questioned the value of some but not all areas of professionalism in public services and their delivery. This has been supplemented by more general sound bites about Broken Britain and waste in public service design and delivery.

The question of definition of Big Society has been a source of considerable frustration to many commentators²³. It is not, however, obvious that the Government should offer a top down definition. Definition may better follow the bottom up direction of Big Society with local definitions sharing in forming a national definition. The Big Society is not a trademarked idea or the exclusive property of the Coalition Government or the Conservative Party. The Big Society Network insists on their non party political character²⁴. With the richness of its practical experience, the third sector itself is very well placed to supply a workable definition and the criteria by which the Big Society will be judged.²⁵

²² Based on the principles in Open Source Planning, Conservative Party Green Paper 2010

²³ See for example, The Young Foundation – Investing in Social Growth: Can the Big Society be more than a slogan, September 2010

²⁴ Social Reporter, 1 April 2010

²⁵ One of the concluding points made at the NCVO/TSRC Big Society Evidence Seminar, 11 October 2010 was “there is a much greater role for the [third] sector to define what success might look like and what a measure of success might be.”

3. What does the Big Society replace?

'Britain has a proud and longstanding charitable tradition and we are convinced that the voluntary sector should play a major role in civic renewal. We will introduce a fair deal on grants to give voluntary sector organisations more stability and allow them to earn a competitive return for providing public services. We will work with local authorities to promote the delivery of public services by social enterprises, charities and the voluntary sector.'²⁶

The Big Society is not divorced from the existing activities of the third sector. The idea is not being written on a blank page:

- As the Conservative Party Manifesto acknowledges, the UK already has a rich and diverse third sector and civil society – there are with 170,000 registered charities and 600,000 community groups²⁷. The evidence is that charities enjoy a high level of confidence and credibility with the general public;
- The UK has extremely long traditions and norms of charitable action, reflected in England adopting its first charity laws over 400 years ago. The role of the Charity Commission over nearly 50 years has provided a regulatory framework and control of abuses on charitable status. All of this has helped to give the UK established structures for charitable action that have proved durable and able to evolve with the legal duty on charities to deliver public benefit at the heart of the 2006 Charities Act;
- The sector has existing funding mechanisms - both contractual and grant based - at national, regional and local level through Government Departments, NDPBs, local authorities, PCTs, charitable Trusts and Foundations and corporate sources;
- The sector has established infrastructure support, both generic (e.g. NCVO, Councils for Voluntary Service) and specialist, either sub sector (e.g. homelessness) or thematically or role based (e.g. third sector leadership, acevo);

²⁶ Conservative Party Manifesto, 2010 General Election

²⁷ UK NCVO Almanac 2010

- The sector makes extensive use of partnership with public services in the delivery of services and advocacy for some of the most vulnerable and needy people in society;
- The sector is a leader in society in facilitating and developing participation by those whom public services have often found it hardest to reach or engage. The sector has been at the forefront of enabling disabled people to take more control over their lives²⁸;
- There are strong generally non-Conservative social and political traditions reflecting a pluralistic view of social and economic activity (e.g. cooperatives, mutuals etc);
- There are many well established well run organisations already very skilled in recruiting and making extensive use of volunteers. In 2009, 41% adults in the UK volunteered. Some 26% of the adult population volunteer each month²⁹;
- When the Coalition Government refers to the Big Society, they need to take into the views of the Liberal Democrats, who have their own traditions and distinctive views about community activism and localism.

Stress is placed in Coalition Government consultation documents on the creation of new organisations in the community³⁰. While there may be needs from time to time for new community based organisations to be created, this undue general emphasis appears seriously misplaced and wasteful in a time of austerity.

²⁸ See for example, *In Community*, (eds) Carl Poll, Jo Kennedy and Helen Sanderson, HSA/In Control 2009

²⁹ Citizenship survey, CLG 2009

³⁰ See for example, the Cabinet Office/Office For Civil Society- *Supporting a Stronger Civil Society*, October 2010

4. Putting the Big Society in place

“The Big Society should not just be about the state pulling back, but about the state and civil society working together, supporting each other through the different roles they play.”

Sir Stuart Etherington, Chief Executive, NCVO³¹

The idea of the Big Society can be compared to New Labour’s ‘third way’ which was the big idea of the Blair Government immediately after the 1997 General Election³². The ‘third way’ had an important role in distinguishing New Labour from Old Labour. The Big Society has an important role in distinguishing the Conservative Party and the Coalition Government from Thatcherism (there is no such thing as society³³).

For a number of reasons, the Big Society has more dynamism - both operationally and institutionally - than the ‘third way’:

- The role of the Office for Civil Society as an important driver at Ministerial and civil servant levels for the Big Society;
- The Cross Government Big Society Ministerial Committee chaired by Francis Maude, Minister of State in the Cabinet Office;
- The proposals for a Big Society Bank funded from unclaimed bank assets ‘to provide new finance for neighbourhood groups, charities, social enterprises and non Governmental bodies. This will provide social enterprises with the start-up funding and support they need to bid for Government contracts or work towards delivering services under a payment by results model’. Support would include funding to intermediary bodies with a track record of supporting and growing social enterprisers³⁴. The Bank will provide loans to existing financial intermediaries like social investors and community lenders. The Financial Times³⁵ reported that the

³¹ Third Sector, 3 November 2010

³² Anthony Giddens – The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy, London 1998

³³ In an interview, Margaret Thatcher actually said: “who is society? There is no such thing!” The Independent on Sunday, 29 September 2006

³⁴ Conservative Party Manifesto, 2010 General Election

³⁵ Financial Times, 19 July 2010

Bank may launch in April 2011 with just £60 million. Lord Wei has suggested that Big Society ISAs might be a possible funding source for the Big Society Bank³⁶ ;

- National Citizens Service for 16 to 19 year olds as a flagship Big Society project with participants creating social action projects;
- The four pilot Big Society vanguard projects – Liverpool; Eden Valley, Cumbria; Windsor & Maidenhead; and London Borough of Sutton;
- Some 5,000 community organisers to build local networks and leadership to be funded under the Office for Civil Society budget;³⁷
- The Communities First Neighbourhood Grant Fund, details of which are due by the end of 2010. This replaces the previous Government's Grassroots Grants Scheme³⁸;
- Big Society Day;
- Pressure from the Prime Minister downwards to advance the idea of a Big Society in the context of major cuts in public expenditure at local and national level.

The 2008 Conservative Party Green Paper³⁹ suggested a Civil Society Select Committee in Parliament but this has yet to be adopted by the Coalition Government.

³⁶ The Guardian, 18 June 2010

³⁷ Announced as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review, October 2010

³⁸ Third Sector, 22 June 2010

³⁹ A Stronger Society: Voluntary Action in The Twenty First Century, Conservative Party, 2008

5. The unintended and unforeseen consequences of the spending cuts

“We should say to every single council in the country, ‘When it comes to looking at trimming your budgets, don’t do the easy thing, which is to cut money to the voluntary bodies and organisations working in our communities. Look at your core costs. Look at how you can do more for less. Look at the value for money you get from working with the voluntary sector’ “.

David Cameron, Prime Minister’s Question Time, House of Commons, 15 September 2010⁴⁰

In the wake of the Comprehensive Spending Review, attention in the third sector has tended to concentrate on the £100 million one year transition funding which third sector organisations with incomes between £50,000 and £10 million will be able to bid for. The stated aims of this funding are to help charities, voluntary groups and social enterprises make the transition to a tougher funding environment, to work with Government to build a big society ‘and to make the most of the opportunities it will bring.’ Charities Aid Foundation commented that “the 12 month lifetime of the fund may not be sufficient to support the sector to play its full part in the radical transformation of public services that the Government clearly aspires to. The Big Society will not be built in a year.”⁴¹

While securing this fund is an achievement, its size is dwarfed by the £3.2 to £5.1 billion New Philanthropy Capital⁴² estimate that the third sector has lost as a result of the cuts. This loss comes out of £12.8 billion of Government funding for charities, which represents a quarter of charity’s £50 billion income⁴³.

The bald headlines of the Comprehensive Spending Review are well known. Central Government Departments will receive on average cuts of 19% and

⁴⁰ This message is being reinforced in the Office for Civil Society document – Exposure of the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector to Cuts in Public Funding – being sent to local authorities and Government Departments, Third Sector, 4 November 2011

⁴¹ Charities Aid Foundation statement on the Comprehensive Spending Review, 20 October 2010

⁴² Preparing for Cuts - New Philanthropy Capital, 2010; see also Iona Joy – Learning To Adapt, Public 18 October 2010

⁴³ Figure for 2008/09 financial year, see commentary by Clarissa Dann, Editor, Caritas, Charities Direct, 25 October 2010

local authority funding will be cut by 7.1% each year over five years⁴⁴. Digging beneath these headline numbers reveals a series of problematic issues for Big Society. It is a commonplace of public policy that there are actual and potential contradictions between different elements of Government policy and plans. Several apply in the case of the Big Society:

- Cuts in public expenditure will have a major impact on the services and staffing of third sector organisations, greatly weakening the ability of these organisations to respond to Big Society initiatives or practice. How local authorities will act is causing considerable concern. Amanda Kelly, lead social care partner at PricewaterhouseCoopers, argues that Councils should invest in evidence based intervention or preventative programmes, adding: “The risk, however, is that we see an increase in slash and burn approaches to cost-cutting which is rather like turning off the tap rather than fixing the leak. As a result, we may make the savings targets in the short term but we are banking up a whole load of debt further down the line.”⁴⁵

While there may be some unevenness in the distribution of pain, no part of the third sector will be significantly unaffected. While not all of the cuts affecting the third sector fall in the 2011-12 financial year, NCVO research indicates that a third of third sector organisations have no significant reserves to fall back on⁴⁶. Most charitable Trusts and Foundations are notoriously reluctant to pick up funding cut by the State or the essential core costs to sustain those organisations. The total expenditure of charitable Trusts and Foundations at £2.7 billion is less than the loss that New Philanthropy Capital predict for the sector.⁴⁷ The continuing viability of many third sector organisations after 31 March 2011 is significantly in question. Most at risk are the small and medium sized third sector organisations with greatest local potency.

- Public expenditure cuts will impact in even more specific ways that limit the sector’s response to the Big Society:
 - Cuts in support for volunteering – The third sector has known for many years that effective volunteering requires training, support and

⁴⁴ Comprehensive Spending Review statement, 20 October 2010

⁴⁵ Quoted in Community Care, 25 June 2010

⁴⁶ Financial Times, 5 August 2010

⁴⁷ Preparing for Cuts - New Philanthropy Capital, 2010

development, all of which require significant funding.⁴⁸ For the period 2008-11, V was due to receive £117 million in funding from the Office of the Third Sector/Office for Civil Society⁴⁹. There were already cuts of £5 million in the V match fund plus £1.95 million in the Government grant for V for this financial year announced in the Emergency Budget. Funding will be switched predominantly from V to National Citizen Service at the lesser figure of £50 million for the next 2 years. Responsibility for funding National Citizen Service will then switch to the Department for Education. As a result of the Emergency Budget, cuts of £14 million were made in the Department for Education's Youth Community Action grant, including axing a Facebook style website for young volunteering; and a cut of £11 million by the Cabinet Office in unallocated funding to encourage volunteering⁵⁰.

- Deep cuts in what are deemed to be discretionary service areas. Grants programmes for voluntary organisations in local authorities are particularly vulnerable to cuts (e.g. Croydon Council has cut 60% of its voluntary sector contracts⁵¹). There will be 12% cuts in the non schools budgets in the Department for Education with impact on 3 million children living in poverty.⁵² The national play programmes creating spaces for children to play, in which the third sector had a substantial stake, were terminated earlier in the financial year as part of Government cutbacks.
- Deep cuts in capital programmes. Many schools play a pivotal role in local communities and third sector activity with extended schools, but their contribution is seriously restricted by antiquated buildings. This is particularly true in the most disadvantaged areas in the country, where the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme was most focused. The termination of the BSF programme weakens significantly the infrastructure for community involvement where schools are involved.

⁴⁸ Volunteering England – An investment Case for Volunteering: Submission to the Spending Review, September 2010

⁴⁹ Third Sector, 22 October 2010

⁵⁰ The Independent on Sunday, 1 August 2010

⁵¹ Volunteering England – An investment Case for Volunteering: Submission to the Spending Review, September 2010

⁵² Maggie Jones, Children & Young People Now 21 October 2010

- Cuts in resources supporting development and innovation. Generally, closure or deep cuts in NDPBs will have a disproportionate impact on innovative methods and services provided by the third sector. There have already been substantial cuts in the budgets of Children's Workforce Development Council (critical role in supporting training cross sectorally for work with early years) and Training & Development Agency for Schools (critical role in supporting extended schools). Capacitybuilders has played a significant role in supporting both infrastructure and front line third sector organisations. Its resources were cut as a result of the first £6 billion package and the organisation will now go entirely as a result of the cull of NDPBs.
- Significant cuts in the ability of less well off individuals to pay charges for third sector services. Reductions to working families tax credits puts the financing of many childcare services at risks, especially in areas where costs are high.⁵³
- There will be increased demand for advice, information and advocacy as a result of rising unemployment brought on by cutting public sector jobs. The Government's own estimate of public sector job losses is 490,000⁵⁴. CIPD estimate that job losses in the public sector will rise to 725,000 with up to a further 500,000 job losses in the private sector.⁵⁵ The demand for services will further increase as welfare reform leads to cuts and changes in benefits (e.g. for many disabled people currently on incapacity benefit). Third sector organisations will be responding to that demand without increased resources and probably therefore less equipped to take on the challenge. The funding of advocacy organisations, frequently not popular with the public service organisations they advocate to, must be particularly vulnerable to cuts. The legal aid budget, a significant source for supporting advocacy cases, will be cut.
- The cuts in Housing Benefit will have a significant impact on third sector services. Cambridge University research for Shelter predicted that up to 134,000 households would have to move or become homeless as a result of the Government's changes in housing allowances⁵⁶. In London, it is

⁵³ Sir Paul Ennals, Children & Young People Now, 21 October 2010

⁵⁴ Office for Budget Responsibility estimate, BBC News, 21 October 2010

⁵⁵ Financial Times, 2 November 2010

⁵⁶ Alex Fenton, Cambridge Centre for Housing & Planning Research – How will the changes to LHA affect Low-Income Tenants in Private Rented Housing, September 2010

estimated that up to 82,000 people⁵⁷ will be affected, potentially uprooting established inner city communities and informal social networks. The loss of social capital in one area will go hand in hand with the additional burdens of service on third sector organisations in the areas where those unable to retain their previous tenancies have to move to. The previous experience of dispersal programmes⁵⁸ are that they are highly disruptive for the families who have to move to an area where they have no roots and often lead to community tensions, weakening bridging social capital and thus making yet more demands on the third sector.

- The Government's flagship project for the NHS – the establishment of GP consortia in place of Primary Care Trusts (PCTs)⁵⁹ – puts the emphasis on senior clinician/ producer views in place of the more power sharing model that PCTs represented with the views of the local community, service users and the third sector reasonably well represented at Board level. Although less significant than local authorities as a source of contract income for the third sector, PCT contracts are still very important for health and social care third sector organisations. The expectation is that the GP consortia will mostly be run by large private health care bodies with limited motivation to give third sector organisations a slice of their profitable business. In the NCVO/TSRC Big Society Evidence Seminar it was argued that “there is more reason to be concerned about the market [than the State] ‘crowding out’ the voluntary sector if services are to be opened up to a broader range of providers and face more commercial pressure.”⁶⁰
- Cuts in public expenditure will drive many public bodies, nationally and locally, to implement streamlined procurement systems with large contract sizes to seek economies of scale. Payment by results will put strains on the cash flow of third sector organisations. David Kane⁶¹ estimates that the sector carries out 10-15% of all Government procurement. The consequences of streamlined/centralised procurement are likely to cut the ability of small and medium sized third sector organisations to bid for service contracts, including for work that those organisations may previously have done on a grant or smaller contract basis.

⁵⁷ Statement by Sir Steve Bullock, Executive Member for Housing, London Councils and Mayor of Lewisham, 20 October 2010

⁵⁸ Particularly refugee dispersal programmes

⁵⁹ Department of Health and NHS – Equity & Excellence: Liberating the NHS, July 2010

⁶⁰ NCVO/TSRC Big Society Evidence Seminar, 11 October 2010

⁶¹ David Kane's blog, NCVO, 29 June 2010

All of the above reduce the capacity of the third sector to respond to the initiatives and demands of Big Society. In a recent survey of staff in the third sector and local authorities, public spending cuts were identified as the biggest barrier to achieving the Big Society.⁶² In July, Sir Stuart Etherington of NCVO said: “I am very concerned about the tidal wave of cuts about to hit the sector. [They] will have a detrimental effect on the services received by some of the most vulnerable people”⁶³. Given the negative impact of these factors on the third sector, different parts of Government are effectively undermining, deliberately or otherwise, intentions of the Big Society, particularly with regard to the role of the third sector.

Nick Hurd, the Minister for Civil Society, told the 2010 NCVO Summer reception⁶⁴ linked social capital to the Big Society aspirations, and that he would act to limit the damage to social capital generated by the sector. The damage now being threatened to social capital appears to be cumulative in nature and likely to get more extensive year on year to 2015. The deep cuts have profound implications for the ability of civic and social action – with third sector organisations at their heart - to operate effectively and deliver for people and communities.

⁶² Third Sector, 19 October 2010; see also same result in a separate survey of third sector staff by Community Sense,, Civil Society Governance 12 October 2010

⁶³ Financial Times, 20 July 2010; The Guardian, 19 July 2010

⁶⁴ NCVO and All Party Parliamentary Group Reception, 8 June 2010 <http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/appg-summer-reception>

6. Some of the big issues

'Our success will partly be measured by the extent to which we can convince the public that reining back the intrusiveness of the state under a conservative government will not lead to the atrophy of community.'

Andrew Tyrie, Conservative MP⁶⁵

One of the tests of Big Society and associated policies is whether they enhance or weaken the capacity of the third sector to deliver public benefit. A lot is clearly riding on the success of the Big Society. That success rests, for example, on how far the Big Society:

- is able to substitute for existing public services;
- releases the contributions of those individual people or groups who may have been held back by the provision of public services or who have not identified a role or contribution because of public services;⁶⁶
- fosters civic engagement, particularly by those not previously engaged in civic and community life – 'The Big Society is about....making it easier, more enjoyable and more powerful for people to engage' (Matthew Taylor of the RSA⁶⁷).

There are rumours in Government and civil service circles that principles based policy should substitute increasingly for evidence based policy. It is claimed that evidence based policy inhibits innovation, but - as earlier sections in this thinkpiece illustrate - it is the public expenditure cuts that are undermining innovation in services and methods in the third sector. The Coalition Government is wedded to three principles – freedom, fairness, responsibility - of which fairness appears to be the most prominent in Government statements. While fairness may have had easy acceptability by focus groups testing opinion before the General Election, it lacks objective definition. Favoured in playground disputes, it offers an uninspiring contrast

⁶⁵ One Nation Group 2006

⁶⁶ At the NCVO/TSRC Big Society Evidence Seminar on 11 October, John Mohan (University of Southampton) said that: "Statistics on volunteering over a long period of time show that the proportion of the population volunteering has remained relatively static. Reports of increase are anecdotal, and the 'crowding out' by the state thesis is not supported by the evidence."

⁶⁷ Matthew Taylor's blog, 19 October 2010

with the proposals that Beveridge set out in his report to tackle the giant evils of want, disease, ignorance, squalor and idleness⁶⁸.

Evidence is fundamental. Big Society has to be seen as an untested social experiment that requires to be evaluated objectively and independently. Assessment of the Big Society should not be a matter of faith or untested trust in altruism.

⁶⁸ Sir William Beveridge – Social Insurance & Allied Services, London 1942

7. The case for evaluating the Big Society

“If you cut the charities, you are cutting our ability to help each other; you are cutting what structures our neighbourliness. This is what Big Society is all about, so you are pulling the rug from under that.”

Dame Suzi Leather, Chair, Charity Commission⁶⁹

There is a strong case for independently evaluating how successful the Big Society is:

- Big Society is a major plank of Coalition Government policy and part of the rationale for the allocation of resources in current plans and prospectively the Comprehensive Spending Review;
- The Big Society is being presented as a substitute for public services in a number of key areas. It is critical to ask who benefits; what assessment of need the substitutes involve; how inclusive are these substituted arrangements; whether it rests on any unstated or unintended notion of ‘the deserving poor’; and what attention is given by such initiatives to equal opportunities;
- Objectively, the Government cannot be both the driver behind Big Society and judge of how effective it is. This is particularly the case because Big Society intends to call on the voluntary contributions of individuals and their personal resources;
- Whatever happens with Big Society will carry lessons for the third sector and what remains of public services. Big Society is, after all, selective in its application to some but not all areas of public services.

Such an evaluation needs to be put in hand at the beginning of the process with clear criteria for evaluation and steps to ensure that all relevant data and information is gathered as part of a detailed evidence base.

It is very important to get beyond the rhetoric. The Big Society will have little credibility if it is simply:

- a fancy new name for contracting out;

⁶⁹ Quoted in Daily Telegraph, 24 October 2010

- a driver of self help as a result of desperation – if that were the case, Big Society would be identified as punitive;
- another way of saying no resources will be committed to community ends (third sector ‘organisations cannot provide more vital services at no cost and with no resources.’ Jonathan Lewis, Chief Executive, The Social Investment Business⁷⁰). It will not help if the Decentralisation & Localism Bill is full of hollow unfunded promises for the third sector to run local services.

⁷⁰ Understanding Social Investment, acevo, 2010

8. Methodological issues

This section sets out methodological issues to be addressed in evaluating the outcomes and impact of Big Society

- There is no one universally agreed definition of Big Society. There may be some common elements which can in turn be represented as a direction of travel. However, through the emphasis on localism, a pluralistic interpretation of Big Society is built into how the concept is understood and applied;
- There is a challenge to identify baselines from which the impact of Big Society can be measured. If existing initiatives become labelled as Big Society, is the baseline when the project started or when the label was attached? For example, 6 million people in the UK are already unpaid family carers for an older or disabled partner, relative or friend. How is the baseline determined?
- What are the elements of a Big Society intervention? What is excluded?
- What are the outputs and outcomes of Big Society interventions and who monitors them? How is causality established to show the difference that a Big Society intervention has made?
- Over what period of time will the outcomes and impacts be judged? Big Society will be expected to pick up the pieces from deep public sector cuts that become operative from 1 April 2011.

9. A matter of criteria

“If we are to build a Big Society, we will need not just civic action, but organised civic action – a well-capitalised, business-like third sector – working in genuine partnership with what David Cameron has called a ‘smart strategic state’, not one that simply retrenches and leaves us to pick up the pieces.”

Stephen Bubb, Chief Executive, acevo⁷¹

It may have been right for the Big Society to have been an expression of philosophy before the General Election. Post Election, Big Society is being pressed to deliver. What aspects of Big Society are measured will be key. This section sets out some of the criteria that may be applied in assessing Big Society:

- How far Big Society initiatives have led change in the community or a section of it (this could be an assessment of social productivity favoured by the RSA 2020 Public Services Commission);
- How far decentralisation of power is extending local involvement and diversity of participation;
- Amount of extra volunteering, time and money given that can be attributed to Big Society;
- How far Big Society has filled the black hole in public services (“We are in part able to pick up slack but we aren’t pretending to be the NHS or social work departments.” Rt.Rev John Pritchard, Bishop of Oxford⁷²);
- Accountability of Big Society initiatives to communities of geography or interest (“The localism and Big Society agenda will need to engage with BME VCOs working with disadvantaged BME communities if they are to be successful” Voice4Change England⁷³);

⁷¹ Stephen Bubb – The Big Society: Moving From Romanticism To Reality, ACEVO, 27 May 2010

⁷² Community Care, 10 September 2010

⁷³ Voice4Change England – A shared vision for the future of the BME voluntary and community sector, September 2010

- Resulting wellbeing of the poorest and most disadvantaged members of society (“The Big Society is about galvanising the whole of the public in fighting poverty.” David Cameron⁷⁴);
- How far Big Society has promoted new or insufficiently tried ways of working (“The Big Society is about giving people, families and communities the tools they need to lift themselves up and make the most of their lives.” David Cameron⁷⁵);
- Social impacts (e.g. addressing the social aspiration gap, reduction of anti social behaviour, lower teenage pregnancy rates, on intergenerational unemployment);
- Economic impacts (e.g. participation in the labour market, skills acquisition);
- Environmental impacts (e.g. planning decisions, increased recycling, litter, reduction of fouling of pavements by dogs);
- Involvement of service users in co-production of Big Society initiatives and transforming place;
- Involvement of third sector in shared decision making, collaborative working, running services, transforming place, and above all delivering public benefit within Big Society;
- Identification of Big Society’s contribution to addressing the deficiency of capital in the third sector (e.g. asset transfer to the third sector);
- Number of community organisers, difference made, and their geographical distribution in relation to wealth and income, and the causes they address;
- Process criteria - smooth transfer of any service taken over from the State, locally or nationally

These criteria could stand alongside any requirements of the Treasury’s Green Book for appraisal and evaluation in Central Government.⁷⁶ Many of the criteria above are relevant to the evaluation of pilot projects with a Big Society label. Evaluation of pilot projects, though essential, will not suffice in testing whether the expectations of Big Society, as Government’s reference to and use of Big Society has extended far beyond these projects.

⁷⁴ Evening Standard, 22 July 2010

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ HM Treasury: The Green Book: Appraisal and Evaluation in Central Government 2003 (reissued August 2010)

10. Less Ambridge, more strategy

“Plotting the UK’s path through these uncertain times needs clear, deep and sustained strategic thinking which adapts to changes in our strategic environment. It needs to be articulated constantly and updated regularly. If the UK is to navigate its way successfully through the networked world, and to ‘lift its eyes to the wider strategic needs of this country’, we need a National Strategy. It must be well funded, coherent and responsive to events as they occur as well as also capable of anticipating opportunities. As things stand there is a little idea of what the UK’s national interest is, and therefore what our strategic purpose should be.”

House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, October 2010⁷⁷

It is said in the US that politicians campaign in poetry and govern in prose⁷⁸. Contemporary society is complex, largely urban and full of interdependencies that would never be grasped by a rural idyll of G.K. Chesterton or the necessary simplicities of episodes in *The Archers*. The General Election was 6 months ago, so we should now expect real strategy and substance from the Government around the idea of the Big Society rather than woolly rhetoric. The forthcoming Green Paper on public services and civil society⁷⁹ will be a test of how serious the Government intends to be.

The third sector has some mutual interest with Government in ensuring that Big Society is given the opportunity to be realised. It is certainly not in the interest of the Government for the idea of Big Society to be seen to fail. Government would be exposed to the charge that it was indistinguishable from Thatcherism of the 1980s, which ultimately proved so unpopular for the Conservatives. It is probably not in the interest of the third sector for the Big Society to fail, as this would appear to weaken what the sector does. However, the third sector should be quite clear that without additional resources it cannot even ameliorate the consequences of deep cuts in public services and their impact on people in diverse communities. The Government is not the only funder of third sector but it is Government cuts that are reducing rather than adding to the resources for the third sector.

⁷⁷ Who Does UK National Strategy? Report by House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, October 2010

⁷⁸ Saying attributed to Mario Cuomo, US politician

⁷⁹ See Civil Society Governance, 3 November 2010

The current debates on Big Society encourage the third sector to learn from its practice in enabling and empowering individuals and communities over many decades. The prospective new realities facing the sector are that it will be underfunded and under aided to tackle what may be expected of it.

Given the weight being placed on the Big Society and the needs of vulnerable people in the community, it is not adequate for responsible Ministers, like Francis Maude, to say that the Big Society will be “chaotic and disorderly”.⁸⁰ No such statement would be made about policing. It does not suffice for the Minister to express a general hope that the third sector would fill in more of the gaps in public service provision than it currently does.⁸¹ The third sector is far more than sticking plaster to be applied over deep cuts. If national strategy is needed for this country’s foreign and defence policy, as the Public Administration Committee recognises, then even more it is required for the future of its public domestic services and for the welfare of its population.

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⁸⁰ Third Sector, 5 October 2010

⁸¹ Ibid

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