

# [The implications of the notion of the big society](https://assignbuster.com/the-implications-of-the-notion-of-the-big-society/)

The ‘ Big Society’ was officially launched by the Prime Minister David Cameron in July 2010 (see NCVO, 2010). However, this was not the first we had heard of the ‘ Big Society’. The notion was first discussed within the Conservative Party from mid 2009 (see Conservative Party, 2010), with the terminology associated with the ‘ Big Society’ coming to the fore in the weeks and months before, during and after the 2010 General Election campaign.

‘ At the core of David Cameron’s vision for revitalising both the UK and the Conservative party is what he describes as the ‘ Big Society’. The concept calls for a restructuring of the relationship between state and society, with a substantial movement of power and responsibility from the former to the latter’ (Pattie & Johnston, 2010, p2).

Some view the ‘ Big Society’ as a positive move with the potential to transform society and address many of its problems through community led action. Others are more sceptical and resistant, viewing the ‘ Big Society’ as an ideologically driven move towards a ‘ do-it-yourself’ society, leading to further social polarisation and disadvantage.

This paper will briefly explore the theoretical and political background to the ‘ Big Society’ before moving on to look at the potential implications and the role of Sheffield City Council in supporting the delivery of this agenda in three key areas.

## What is the ‘ Big Society’?

Put simply, ‘ the ‘ Big Society’ is a Government agenda that seeks to shift power from politicians to people’ (NCVO, 2010, p2). It ‘ represents an approach that seeks to give increased power to people to solve problems closer to where they live’ (Cabinet Office, 2010).

Three interlinked agendas and questions are seen as key to building an understanding of the notion of the ‘ Big Society’ (see GOYH, 2010). Firstly, the idea of social action is seen as an important building block of the ‘ Big Society’. Examples of this include supporting volunteerism and philanthropy, in an attempt to answer the question ‘ what can we do for others?’. Secondly, public service reform is seen as an important element in moving towards a ‘ Big Society’. This is not only about reducing red tape and bureaucracy, but importantly about increasing transparency and accountability across public services. Key to this is identifying ‘ what the state can do’, and coming to some level of consensus about what role the state can and should play in key areas of public life. Finally, community empowerment and creating communities in charge of their own direction is seen as a key part of the ‘ Big Society’. This will help individuals work together to identify ‘ what we can do for ourselves’ as a result of collective endeavour and action.

‘ The ‘ Big Society’ moves from a default position of central design and governmental provision to citizen-driven partnership across all sectors’ (Cabinet Office, 2010). In order to achieve this, Government envisage an approach built around ‘ a broad ‘ ecosystem’ made up of three levels (see figure 1), where no one player dominates another’ (Cabinet Office, 2010). In addition, figure 2 shows the three priorities which Government feel need to be focussed on in order to build the ‘ Big Society ecosystem’ and ‘ reconfigure how policy is developed and delivered’ (Cabinet Office, 2010).

## Figure 1

## Figure 2

1Neighbourhood groups comprise a broad range from those with an explicit social or activism mission to those focused on local participation, engagement and community building whether informally through sports and interests or more informally in conjunction with local anchor institutions

(Source: Cabinet Office, 2010)

Before going on to look at the implications of the notion of the ‘ Big Society’ in Sheffield it seems relevant to briefly pause and examine the theoretical and political background to the notion of the ‘ Big Society’.

## The ‘ Big Society’ and public policy

Although closely associated with the Conservative Party, the General Election campaign of 2010, and more recently a number of policy areas developed by the Coalition Government, the ‘ Big Society’ idea is far from new.

‘ In some ways, the idea is as old as democracy itself. From ancient Athens on, a recurrent normative image has been that of the engaged citizen playing an active part in his or her community’ (Pattie & Johnston, 2010, p4). Each new British government since the late 1970s has put its own spin on this idea (as evidenced in Sheffield First Partnership, 2010).

David Cameron’s support for this idea follows this general trend, however it is a view that has not always sat comfortably with the Conservative Party. It is important to acknowledge that ‘ in rejection of Margaret Thatcher’s 1987 declaration that there was ‘ no such thing as society’, David Cameron used his first speech as Conservative Party leader (in December 2005) to announce his belief that ‘ there is such a thing as society, it’s just not the same as the state’ (Pattie and Johnston, 2010, p5).

Historically within Conservative thought the idea of the Big Society can be traced back to Edmund Burke’s championing of the ‘ little platoons’. ‘ These are the intermediate organisations – families, communities and so on – between the individual and the state. For Burke, these little platoons were a bulwark against two sources of tyranny: on the one hand, the overweening power of the state and on the other the uncontrolled demands of the mob’ (Pattie and Johnston, 2010, p5).

Although initially the ‘ Big Society’ can be viewed as the opposite to Labour statism ‘ it contains distinct echoes of New Labour’s agenda. New Labour had intended, for instance, greater involvement of citizens and voluntary groups in decision-making and provision of services. But intentions were sidetracked somewhat by external events and by internal disputes within the Labour government’ (Pattie and Johnston, 2010, p5).

Outside of political debate the idea of the ‘ Big Society’ draws on a number of social and political trends. ‘ It taps into a growing anti-politics mood among the public’ (Pattie and Johnston, 2010, p5) and ideas surrounding ‘ politics for an anti-political age’ as highlighted in the work of Mulgan (1994), Stoker (2006) and Hay (2007) (cited in Pattie and Johnston, 2010, p5).

Finally, it seems worthwhile to highlight the strong links between thinking on the ‘ Big Society’ and the concept of social capital. Putman argued that ‘ communities rich in social capital were more efficient, happier, better-run, safer, healthier – just downright nicer places to live in – than communities in which social capital was lacking’ (Putman, 2000 – cited in Pattie and Johnston, 2010, p6). Many of the positive elements of social capital are the very things that a ‘ Big Society’ seeks to create and sustain.

## The current context for the ‘ Big Society’

As the Conservative – Liberal Democrat Coalition Government took shape in May 2010 the ‘ Big Society’ notion once again came to the fore. The Coalition Agreement (see HM Government, 2010) specifically makes reference to the ‘ Big Society’ as part of a wider focus on ‘ social action’. Significantly, the ‘ Big Society’ ‘ was the first major policy announcement of the new Coalition Government.

The Government sees the ‘ Big Society’ as being developed within the three-fold wider national context of; a lack of trust in politics, longstanding social problems and unprecedented challenges to public finances (see Cabinet Office, 2010). The aim is to ‘ build a society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control’ (Conservative Party, 2010, p1).

## What does this mean for Sheffield City Council?

As set out earlier in this paper, the key principles and context for the ‘ Big Society’ are relatively easy to engage with and think about at a general level. ‘ The difficult questions arise when thinking about its implementation. What is clear though is that in the context of increased localism, the role of the local authority will be fundamental to its success, and to turning the ‘ Big Society’ rhetoric and vision in to reality’ (Office for Public Management, 2010, p1).

The following sections build on the analysis already carried out and go on to set out the potential implications of the ‘ Big Society’ for Sheffield City Council in the following three main areas of; laying the foundations for the ‘ Big Society’, the potential implications for the Council itself, and finally the implications for the relationship between the Council and the Voluntary, Community and Faith (VCF) Sector.

## Laying the foundations for the ‘ Big Society’

‘ Whatever one’s political persuasion, it’s possible to envisage how the ‘ Big Society’ agenda, with its emphasis on more involvement of local communities in social outcomes, could support the creation of positive change’ (Office for Public Management, 2010, p2).

In many cases the ‘ Big Society’ is already happening in Sheffield. Sheffield can lay claim to innovation and best practice over a number of years in public sector reform, community empowerment (e. g. through the use of a Community Assemblies to set local priorities and allocate funding) and in its relationship with the VCF Sector. When setting the context for how the ‘ Big Society’ may impact on a city as large and complex as Sheffield it is important not to lose sight of what is already happening at an organisational, community and individual level. The analysis in previous sections has gone some way to setting out the varied political roots and ‘ philosophical ancestry’ of the ‘ Big Society’ notion. However, in its current form it is closely linked to the policies and ambitions of the Coalition Government.

‘ In addition, ‘ Big Society’ initiatives coincide with a period of austerity in public spending. Any changes in services and service delivery will inevitably be linked to cuts in much of the media and in the eyes of the public’ (Sheffield First Partnership, 2010, p3).

These are both important points, as if the perception of local politicians and the wider general public is that the ‘ Big Society’ is driven by a particular political party or philosophical viewpoint this could present a barrier to the universal acceptance of any initiatives or legitimate outcomes that result from ‘ Big Society’ action.

Within the local political context of Sheffield this is a particularly important point. The Council is currently in ‘ no overall control’, with a Liberal Democrat Leader. In addition, many of the national issues around government policy and funding are played out in the City and receive increased media attention due to Sheffield’s connections with the Deputy Prime Minister. With this in mind it is important for any approach to the ‘ Big Society’ in Sheffield to be genuinely built from the needs of the community – whether directly (e. g. through social action) or indirectly (e. g. from information collected by service delivery organisations) – in order for it to be aligned to the needs and aspirations of the local community and to avoid it becoming overly politicised.

‘ For the ‘ Big Society’ to work, all local authority staff and stakeholders need to understand the ‘ Big Society’. Local authorities will need to ensure that they effectively communicate a locally specific ‘ Big Society’ vision to their own staff, members and stakeholders to motivate people to work towards a common goal’ (Office for Public Management, 2010, p3).

## Implications of the ‘ Big Society’ for Sheffield City Council

A number of factors are currently impacting on the role, nature and size of local authorities such as Sheffield. This presents a number of challenges and opportunities as the implications of the ‘ Big Society’ are thought through at an organisational and political level.

It is clear from the limited information from central Government surrounding the ‘ Big Society’ that local government will be central to creating and engaging with the ‘ Big Society’ ‘ ecosystem’, it will also have a clear role to play in delivering a number of the priorities of the ‘ Big Society’. However, ‘ it is important to acknowledge that local government is part of the state’ (Tizard, 2010) and therefore it will be subject to continuing reform whilst also trying to engage the local community in debate about what any reforms should look like.

‘ The ‘ Big Society’ represents a different relationship between citizen and the state. In some ways the Big Society can replace the state but in other ways it merely represents a ‘ nudge’ towards a greater emphasis on the citizen, community and third sector’ (Sheffield First Partnership, 2010, p3). In many instances (and in some service areas more than others) this will require a change in mind-set, with ‘ a move from a corporate to mutual philosophy, a redefinition of the role of elected members and democracy, and in some instances giving up power and demonstrating listening’ (Sheffield First Partnership, 2010, p3).

This creates a number of challenges for local Elected Members and from a theoretical perspective raises a number of interesting questions around the ideas of representative and participatory democracy (see Pearce, 2010). This in itself is not a new concept or dilemma for Elected Members. However, the ‘ Big Society’ agenda potentially adds a further level of complexity to this dynamic.

National Government has already announced a number of ‘ Big Society’ policies which set the context nationally. These include, the ‘ Big Society Bank’, a national ‘ Big Society’ day, the Localism Bill, and a new right for public sector workers to form employee-owned co-operatives and bid to take over the services they deliver. Local Elected Members and local authority managers will be called on to deliver a number of policy goals and expectations encouraged by central Government. A key role for Sheffield City Council will be in ‘ transforming government action from top-down micromanagement and one-size-fits-all solutions to a flexible approach defined by transparency, payment by results, and support for social enterprise and cooperatives’ (Tizard, 2010).

One concern is that through devolving power down to the local level ‘ different outcomes in different localities will lead to rising inequalities – not only geographically, but amongst different sectors of society. With this difference, it must be ensured that there is a consistency of opportunity’ (Sheffield First Partnership, 2010, p4).

Key to ensuring that everyone benefits from the ‘ Big Society’ is focused activity to identify how to support complex communities or those with low social capital. ‘ Citizens with less time, resources, or ‘ quieter voices’ such as children and the vulnerable are in a worse position to take advantage of the new opportunities provided by these changes’ (Sheffield First Partnership, 2010, p5). With this in mind a key role for local authorities is managing any risks that may arise from new forms of provision. One view of the role of a Local Authority in the ‘ Big Society’ is ‘ not for control, but for quality control – protecting core and essential services; protecting values and principles’ (Sheffield First Partnership, 2010, p4).

Within the wider context of the ‘ Big Society’ a key role for Sheffield City Council as an organisation will be to create the conditions that safeguard the wellbeing of all citizens and communities, providing protection for the most vulnerable. This is already a key role for local authorities but it may become increasingly important in offsetting any disadvantage or unintentional outcomes of the ‘ Big Society’.

## Implications of the ‘ Big Society’ for Sheffield City Council’s relationship with the VCF Sector

Within Sheffield a large amount of successful activity is already led or supported by the VCF Sector. In some instances this is wholly independent of the local authority and delivers vital services to the citizens of Sheffield. However, a substantial amount of VCF Sector activity in the City is publically funded. Over the coming years this will need to change as the pressure on public funding intensifies.

‘ There is a challenge for the VCF sector to change their funding base from grants from the public sector to a greater use of social enterprise, cooperative and mutuals. In addition, Philanthropy and increased charitable giving are regarded as key parts of the ‘ Big Society’, yet it is unclear how they are to be increased and better directed’ (Sheffield First Partnership, 2010, p4).

The ‘ Big Society’ idea sets out ‘ a larger role for social enterprises, charities and voluntary organisations in the provision of services, it also plans for a substantial transfer of control to ordinary citizens, coming together to provide for their own communities’ (Pattie & Johnston, 2010, p2).

This sets an interesting context for the relationship between Sheffield City Council and the wider VCF Sector, with ‘ local authorities having to consider how best to align their activity to and support the work of community groups, both current and emerging’ (Office for Public Management, 2010, p2).

The relationship with the VCF Sector is integral to all three of the agendas and questions of the ‘ Big Society’ set out earlier in this paper. The VCF Sector is one of the key ways in which Sheffield City Council can allow local people to participate more effectively in the governance, design and delivery of services in their communities (helping to identify ‘ what the state can – and should – do’). Through supporting community empowerment and drawing together social action the VCF Sector has a valuable contribution to make in focussing activity and providing a framework which helps individual citizens and communities identify ‘ what they can do for themselves’ and ‘ what they can do for others’.

Within local authority areas such as Sheffield the VCF Sector will need to adapt and change to the increasing responsibility placed on it by ‘ Big Society’. It is widely acknowledged that there will be a need for new initiatives to emerge, but also a need to recognise the valuable resources and good practice that is already in place.

Chanan and Miller (2010, p2) argue that ‘ most of the ‘ Big Society’ policy does not rest on the idea of communities ‘ taking over’ mainstream public services, although this is a view that has been caricatured by the media’. It is acknowledged that few communities would want to take over statutory public services, and where they did there are no guarantees that existing problems would not exist.

In many instances, where community groups want to or are able to effectively run specialist non-statutory elements of public services they are able to do so through social enterprises or by bidding for such work through established processes. Chanan and Miller (2010) go on the state that where services are statutory it is right that a certain level of accountability, standards and bureaucracy are attached to them.

They do however set out an important role for the VCF Sector in ‘ complementing and co-producing public services’. ‘ The underlying principle is not the state ‘ offloading’ public services but the state and people working together to ensure maximum value either from a public service or from a voluntary service initiated by a community group. It is this that will make public services more efficient and economical and communities more capable’ (Chanan and Miller, 2010, p3).

However, Tizzard (2010) and NCVO (2010) have an alternative view and believe the very essence of the ‘ Big Society’ will lead to more social enterprise, third and community sector public service delivery.

So, at one end of the potential continuum of involvement of the VCF Sector in the ‘ Big Society’ is the ‘ taking over’ of or ‘ co-production’ of public services. Although this may seem unlikely in the short term it is a possibility that needs to be considered and will increasingly be part of political debate. Developing ways to open up debate on this issue in Sheffield is clearly a responsibility of the democratically accountable local authority.

However, at the other end of this continuum is developing an approach and ‘ local mindset’ where people have the power and confidence to take action where they feel it is necessary. This could be through volunteering to support local projects, causes or initiatives (existing or new), or maybe through schemes to recruit ‘ community organisers’. Some infrastructure for this to take place already exists within Sheffield, but it is not consistent across all geographical areas and does not necessarily appeal to all social groups. Furthermore, it is not clear how much capacity and willingness there is for people to engage in this type of activity beyond the ‘ small army’ of people who are already involved (see Pattie & Johnson 2010).

It is acknowledged that ‘ Increased volunteering will need a framework and incentives to widen recruitment and increase the volunteer base. It should be recognised that volunteers are not a stable workforce and cannot replace aspects of the public sector like-for-like’ (Sheffield First Partnership, 2010, p4). Within Sheffield the VCF Sector needs to be supported in building their response to ‘ Big Society’ and building capacity to deliver the ‘ Big Society’ agenda is essential. A number of commentators set out the important role that Local Authorities can play in helping to ensure that the VCF Sector have the relevant skills and capacity to deliver the ‘ Big Society’ and in helping to build consortia that can deliver local priorities.

Outside of funding, providing assets and working with partners to set up volunteer schemes, the Office for Public Management (2010) set out a number of ways in which local authorities may support the VCF Sector in working towards the ‘ Big Society’. Examples include initiating and incubating new ideas, providing support and advice, sharing knowledge in order to support community initiatives, and helping to remove some of the barriers that the VCF Sector may experience when trying to do things differently. In addition, the Office for Public Management (2010) also set out the important role for local authorities in managing risk and reducing inequalities (both points discussed earlier in this paper).

Above all, there needs to be an acknowledgement that the approach and involvement of the VCF Sector in the ‘ Big Society’ will look different in different places. ‘ These differences will be due to the different choices and decisions made by people in these localities, different levels of service need and service provision and the ethos of any new schemes that are introduced’ (Sheffield First Partnership, 2010, p2).

This difference can be viewed as positive as it has the potential to deliver increased levels of competition and choice where appropriate, allowing local services to reach and support local people more effectively. However, an important point to consider is what happens in those communities and neighbourhoods where there is little or no VCF infrastructure or where people are not willing or able to engage in the ‘ Big Society’. If this is just small pockets then the hope is that the enthusiasm and energy from neighbouring areas will drive activity. However, where lack of engagement is widespread and shows little evidence of developing organically what resources and mandate will local authorities have to intervene? Will it be politically and morally acceptable to allow nothing to happen in some areas, whilst others thrive in the ‘ Big Society’? This is also an important consideration given that in some areas it may take longer to build the ‘ Big Society’ than in others.

With this in mind, there is clearly a role for the local authority to work with the VCF Sector to ensure that such potentially negative aspects of the ‘ Big Society’ are reduced and to unite people from all sectors and parts of the community to ensure that everyone benefits.

## Conclusion

There is still much confusion surrounding the notion of the ‘ Big Society’, which remains a potentially complex and controversial area of emerging public policy. Many commentators, politicians and academics have concluded that the ‘ Big Society’ can be what you want it to be and that success depends on applying the principles and ideas most appropriately and effectively at a local level.

This paper has only focussed on three elements which are of direct relevance to Sheffield City Council as it starts to develop its thinking around the ‘ Big Society’. However, many of the issues raised will be relevant to other areas.

Much is already happening which could be defined as the ‘ Big Society’. The question is not if this activity and commitment will continue (as I am sure it will), but if the terminology of the ‘ Big Society’ will still be with us in 12 months – only time will tell.

The opportunity of the ‘ Big Society’ is surely around harnessing the new and alternative sources of ideas, energy, capacity and challenge which the current focus on the ‘ Big Society’ brings. Importantly, this needs to work with existing capacity, resources, enthusiasm and political will to deliver on shared outcomes that impact positively on individuals and communities.

For the reasons discussed earlier in this paper ‘ some degree of oversight over ‘ Big Society’ initiatives is essential. The public sector, the state, and the VCF sector have important roles to play here’ (Sheffield First Partnership, 2010, p4).

In addition, there needs to be an acknowledgment that certain approaches (e. g. volunteering, social action) will be better suited to delivering certain types of ‘ Big Society’ activity. However, there is still a need for the development of long term strategic approaches and the maintenance of statutory services. The Young Foundation (2010, p20) set out a useful distinction between ‘ services that can be tailored or devolved to communities, with service standards shaped or set locally’ and ‘ services that require central planning, delivery and oversight, with service standards set by the local authority’. Where this line falls will vary locally and will be dependent on a range of factors such as need, community capacity and political will, however this is a useful way of framing the wider ‘ Big Society’ debate.

Within the current climate of public sector cuts and reforms it is important to understand that creating a smaller state won’t necessarily (or automatically) lead to a ‘ Big Society’. In some areas there will be a role to play around directing resources, leadership, nurturing, support, encouragement and enabling. In the majority of cases an organisation such as a local authority has the governance and democratic accountability to carry out this role, and importantly ensure fairness and equality. However, for the ‘ Big Society’ to work the overall approach needs to remain fluid, dynamic and responsive. It is only through adopting such an approach that the needs and aspirations of individuals and communities can be best met. This in itself may be a challenge for large organisations such as local authorities, but it is arguably one that they need to rise to in order to make the most of the ‘ Big Society’ opportunities.