

The Big Society: step by step

The purpose of this briefing is to introduce:

- The Coalition Government's Big Society agenda
- The draft Structural Reform Plans that will influence the October's Spending Review 2010 cuts, decentralisation, localism, and Big Society delivery
- The five key members of the Coalition Government driving forward the Big Society agenda within the Government, and
- The main and various areas of implementation and linked questions.

There is a strong emphasis on a VCS infrastructure perspective partly as a means to identify implementation issues and partly in response to the Cabinet Office's forthcoming consultation on the best way of supporting frontline groups (part of their draft Structural Reform Plan).

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Introduction

The slogans are probably familiar now: “Big Society not Big Government” or possibly “Big Society, small state”.

Behind these Coalition Government slogans are three main themes that feed into one another and run across current Departmental planning:

- The cuts agenda, driven by the impetus to balance the books, necessitates a drawing in of the state.
- A desire to shrink the state in the name of localism and decentralisation: a “control shift”.
- A desire and necessity to encourage greater social responsibility, “social action” or “people power” as the Prime Minister recently said and ‘take up the slack’.

As we know, the Cuts agenda dominates and many people will lose their jobs. It is expected that besides public sector job losses there will be a significant impact on the private sector.

The Big Society agenda has been intimately linked with the voluntary and community sector. This week’s Newsnight piece spoke only of the voluntary sector and voluntary action delivering the Big Society agenda.

On the one hand, this Government has raised the profile of the sector, and of its potential significance, in a way that we might not have expected. And they are listening to us right now. On the other hand, we are being placed at odds with local public sector partners and unions who may see the sector as making significant gains.

Richard Caulfield (Chief Executive of VSNW) recently made a clear public statement that the ‘voluntary sector should not be the Trojan Horse of privatisation’. This sentiment has previously been expressed by Graham Worrell, the Chair of Social Enterprise North West.

Cuts

The Budget committed the Government to identifying large scale cuts over the next four years. These cuts are to be identified through the Spending Review 2010 process and [consultation](#)¹, which is currently underway and expected to be published on 20th October 2010. This will also clarify what the plans for working with the third sector look like.

At the moment each Government department is drawing up a draft Structural Reform Plan. The primary purpose of this is to identify structural reforms that cut expenditure over the next four years. Published plans are currently draft and are not linked to explicit statements of reduced expenditure (the 25% or 40% cuts models) but will be significant components of the final published Comprehensive Spending Review 2010.

Structural Reform Plans

There are now a number of Draft Structural Reform Plans which have been published

- [Cabinet Office Structural Reform Plan](#)²
- [Communities and Local Government \(CLG\) Structural Reform Plan](#)³
- [Schools System Draft Structural Reform Plan](#)⁴ (first part of the Department for Education)
- [Department of Health Structural Reform Plan](#)⁵ (sits alongside the *Liberating the NHS White Paper*)

This briefing focuses on the first two draft plans: Cabinet Office and CLG.

¹ **Spending Review Challenge:** <http://spendingchallenge.hm-treasury.gov.uk/>

² <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/414879/srp-cabinet-office.pdf>

³ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/structuralreformplan>

⁴ http://www.education.gov.uk/news/news/~/_/media/Files/lacuna/news/SchoolsSystemStructuralReformPlanpdf.ashx

⁵ http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_117371

Members of the Government with key responsibility for Big Society

Francis Maude, Minister for Cabinet Office

Each department has now nominated a minister to sit on a Ministerial Committee for Big Society, which will be chaired by Francis Maude, Minister for the Cabinet Office.

Maude featured on Newsnight's piece on the Big Society from earlier this week: <http://bbc.co.uk/i/t3cln/> (See the first 25 minutes of Wednesday's Newsnight which provide a fair introduction to Big Society, cuts agenda and Francis Maude - you may wish to fast forward through the report from Hastings).



Nick Hurd, Minister for Civil Society, within the Cabinet Office

(previously Shadow Third Sector Minister for over a year)

Besides recently acknowledging the need to work with what exists, Nick Hurd has stated that the cuts are "...clearly a significant risk to the Big Society agenda," (Action Planning's Charity Funding and the New Government conference, 1st July).

"Perhaps the only constraint on the sector is money; demand will always outstrip supply," he said, pledging that getting the newly-renamed Big Society Bank up and making grants is a top priority."

But, he added, "The sector must respond to the times... really needs to get its house in order, and I'm confident that it will," he said. Full story: [Civil Society Finance](#)⁶

Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (CLG)

Perhaps the mostly firmly committed Minister to reducing red tape, guidance, and structures (eg Comprehensive Area Assessment), he firmly supports a localism agenda unfettered by Big Government regulation.



Key links: [Biography](#)⁷ and [Speech to Local Government Association Conference](#)⁸



Greg Clark, Minister for Decentralisation within CLG

Having previously been the Shadow Minister for Charities, Social Enterprises and Volunteering his responsibilities include Decentralisation, Big Society and Planning policy.

Speech at LGA Conference: "Decentralisation is not one policy agenda, but many. As well as the public service agenda, there is the planning agenda, the direct democracy agenda and other vital matters like local taxation, regional government and the role of the voluntary sector." [Full speech](#)⁹.

Lord Nat Wei, Government Advisor on Big Society

Appointed to the House of Lords by the Coalition in order to be the Government Advisor, he was previously the Chair of the Big Society Network which was launched earlier this year, prior to the election. He seems to recognise that investment needs to be made especially in order to enable disadvantaged communities to take control. Early piece in The Independent: [Mr Big Society](#)¹⁰



⁶ http://www.civilsociety.co.uk/finance/news/content/6911/cuts_put_big_society_agenda_at_risk_says_hurd

⁷ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/profiles/corporate/ericpickles#responsibilities>

⁸ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/speeches/corporate/lgaconference2010>

⁹ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/speeches/corporate/lgasconference2010>

¹⁰ <http://johnrentoul.independentminds.livejournal.com/406848.html>

Big Society Draft Departmental Structural Reform Plans: Questions

On 18th May 2010 the Coalition Government published a document outlining their intentions for 'Building the Big Society'¹¹. Since then a number draft Structural Reform Plans have been published.

The two departments very much leading on Big Society are the Cabinet Office and Communities & Local Government (CLG). The following brief summaries and questions are drawn from section 6 of the Cabinet Office plan (which focuses on Big Society) and from across CLG's document which focuses on decentralisation, localism and Big Society.

Please look at these two documents first hand. You may have other questions and answers.

- [Cabinet Office Structural Reform Plan](#)¹²
- [Communities and Local Government \(CLG\) Structural Reform Plan](#)¹³
- [NCVO exploration of the contextual evidence for 'Building the Big Society'](#) (18 May)

We hope that the following questions serve as prompts. The majority of these issues deserve more time and space for the consideration than is possible within one briefing so please don't feel that you need to respond to every question. It is likely that your experience and expertise will, hopefully, gravitate to a number of questions. In true Big Society manner, the answers have to be yours!

Please consider how you could evidence and demonstrate your case. We understand that the next unofficial deadline for influencing is around about the end of July.

The areas highlighted by these two departments are:

Empowering communities

The government is investing in, and is prepared to invest in, community organisers; there is also a stated action to set up a fund to support the creation of neighbourhood groups.

What needs to be done to empower communities? What does infrastructure need to do to empower communities? How can communities have a greater say over their public services? Do we want to provide an outline of current and potential community development work? What investment needs to continue?

Economic engagement

The Government wants local authorities to lead economic growth and regeneration, and for businesses (with local authorities through Local Economic Partnerships) to lead on an enterprise agenda (still to be defined).

How will communities, neighbourhoods and the third sector engage in these decision-making processes? How will they be supported to engage? How will decisions about the future apportionment of resources be made?

What role will infrastructure have in supporting the creation of mutuals and cooperatives? Should infrastructure offer a business support outreach function to support Big Society?

¹¹ NCVO have documented these areas of activity and provided an excellent outline of the contextual evidence, which goes through each action within each of the five broad headings published in May.

Recommended reading: <http://bigcivilsociety.blogspot.com/2010/07/ncvos-big-society-evidence-base.html>

¹² <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/414879/srp-cabinet-office.pdf>

¹³ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/structuralreformplan>

Social Norms

The Government wants to “develop a social norms agenda” to encourage greater volunteering and social action.

Should we outline infrastructure’s current support for ‘social action’ - - what do we offer? What could infrastructure offer and what would we require to make that offer?

Social investment and philanthropy

NB Nick Hurd recently called for examples of how business and third sector can work together.

How could infrastructure better support Corporate Social Responsibility?

What investment would be required?

Are there other good models of VCS/business working?

National Citizens Service

The roll out plan for a National Citizens Service is currently being developed. Is it a compulsory scheme?

Do we want to campaign on this issue? What is NWIP’s perspective?

New local Housing Trusts

The Government is planning to create a new generation of local housing trusts.

What will these new local housing trusts be like? How will community groups and neighbourhoods be supported to engage in these trusts? Will residents own a share? What will happen to future social tenants? Will there be a sustainable model of neighbourhood-level ownership?

Planning

The Government intends to put communities in charge of planning.

How will Local Planning Authorities be accountable to communities?

How will we build the skills of communities to plan? to want to plan?

Simplify regulation

The government is consulting on current regulation and unnecessary red tape: [Your Freedoms](#)¹⁴.

What regulations are a massive burden on your organisation or other VCS groups? How could they be reduced?

How could the reduction in regulation of local public sector be passed on to groups? Will the lack of a national performance framework cause inconsistency and added local bureaucracy?

Are there key regulations whose absence would be particularly damaging to an inclusive Big Society agenda?

Financial Exclusion

What role could infrastructure play in addressing financial exclusion?

¹⁴ <http://www.vsnw.org.uk/news/view/2010-07-01-government-consultation-on-cutting-third-sector-red-tape>

Commissioning

The Government wants to “increase trust in the public commissioning process, while creating a more level playing field for the voluntary sector”.

What should the Government do to support this? What should specific Government departments do to support this?

What could VCS infrastructure offer to support this?

How central will a **total place** approach to commissioning be? Will VCS groups be able to effectively engage and deliver specialist services (see [VSNW's Tackling Worklessness](#)¹⁵ Briefing paper which identifies a number of key total place issues for the sector)?

Local Authority accountability

The Government intends that local authorities will primarily report to local people not central government.

What local government inspections and frameworks should remain?

What oversight should central government retain?

How will local people be able to benchmark local public sector performance?

How can local authorities be incentivised to invest in communities and to best build the local economy?

How can communities be better supported to effectively engage in local scrutiny processes?

The Government is going to outline a significant number of measures to let people see how their money is spent.

Are these measures adequate?

Big Society Bank

The Cabinet Office plan includes creating a fund to “support the creation of neighbourhood groups” by December 2010.

How might we demonstrate need and potential in the NW?

What should the Big Society Bank fund or finance? Presuming about £8m in the NW, what's the best way to invest this?

Addressing privatisation of services

The Government wants to ‘support the creation of mutuals, co-operatives, charities and social enterprises to have a greater involvement in public services by giving public sector workers a new right to form employee-owned co-operatives’.

If services are privatised, how can people have a say over their services? What measures need to be put in place?

What role can infrastructure have in supporting people and community-ownership of services?

Is there a genuine alternative to privatisation that more fully engages communities? Do we want public sector services transferred to us?

The Government is proposing that communities are to be given the right to take over state-run services.

If state-run services are to be taken over by communities, what support do those communities need? How will such services remain accountable to any but the few?

Will some form of temporary, leasehold, trusteeship model of ownership be used that ensures users (and future service-users) have the shift in control they need?

¹⁵ [http://www.vsnw.org.uk/files/Publications/29_Tackling_Worklessness_in_the_North_West\(1\).doc](http://www.vsnw.org.uk/files/Publications/29_Tackling_Worklessness_in_the_North_West(1).doc)

Personalisation

As far as we can tell, personalisation is set to continue and extend.

Do we support the personalisation of services? Should this be extended to services for children and young people?

What infrastructure support do groups need to be successful in the personalisation agenda?

Local VCS/public sector relationships

The top-down framework for local partnership working (LSPs, CAA + monitoring framework in general, LAA) is being abolished and Government is considering how the Compact may be linked to the Big Society agenda.

Should we request a minimum framework?

Do we need a new understanding or recommended model of how we work in partnership with local authorities? What do we need to consider? What role will infrastructure play?

Should the new Local Economic Partnerships and other sub-regional structures be more accountable to communities? How?

Should there be a new framework for supporting communities within the national Compact?

Influencing Westminster

There is a possibility that the GOs outside London will also close in October of this year.

In light of the potential closure of Government Offices and ending the link they provide to 12 Government Departments, how will the North influence policy development? In the short to medium term, under the current timetable for GOs, how will the North feedback on the implementation of the Government's decentralisation agenda? How will a coherent voice based on a coherent evidence base be presented?

Select Committee for Civil Society

The Government has said it will establish a Civil Society Select Committee.

How will links beyond London be encouraged?

Do we want to champion/encourage an MP for membership of this proposed Select Committee? Who?

Government Departments

In terms of the Spending Review, are there messages for other Government departments?

National consultation processes

Do you feel fully engaged in the Government's consultation processes so far? Do they feel transparent to you? Do you feel the current Government has an understanding of the National Compact?

Do you feel national VCS bodies are critically engaging the Government and seeking to link back to the sector? Do you feel that the Big Society debate is being overly dominated by top down, London-based, VCS umbrellas?

For further information about Big Society you may wish to visit VSNW's Big Society Policy Resource. This can be found online at:

[VSNW's Big Society Policy Resource](http://bigcivilsociety.blogspot.com/)¹⁶

¹⁶ VSNW Big Society Policy Resource: <http://bigcivilsociety.blogspot.com/>

VSNW (Voluntary Sector North West) is the regional voluntary sector network for the North West. The purpose of VSNW is to ensure that the voluntary and community sector (VCS), in all its diversity, takes its full part in shaping the future of the North West.

VSNW works with 150 members which

- work across the region directly supporting and delivering services for individuals, or
- are VCS infrastructure organisations (LIOs) that work with local voluntary and community groups.

VSNW members provide community services, regenerate neighbourhoods, support individuals, promote volunteering and tackle discrimination. The 40 generalist LIOs in membership of VSNW have a membership of 6,780 VCS groups and are in contact with 19,800 local voluntary and community sector groups in the North West – just under two-thirds (63%) of the region's VCS groups.

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