

Briefing Paper

The Big Society: News from the Frontline in Eden

August 2010

Introduction

The government's 'Big Society' project was launched by David Cameron in Liverpool on 19th July 2010. As part of this, four areas have been identified as Vanguard Communities where it is intended to 'turn government completely on its head'. These areas are Eden, Liverpool, Sutton and Windsor & Maidenhead.

David Cameron said:

"My great passion is building the Big Society. Anyone who's had even a passing interest in what I've been saying for years will know that.

"The 'Big Society' is...something different and bold... It's about saying if we want real change for the long-term, we need people to come together and work together – because we're all in this together.

"(We want) Neighbourhoods who are in charge of their own destiny, who feel if they club together and get involved they can shape the world around them.

"If you've got an idea to make life better, if you want to improve your local area, don't just think about it – tell us what you want to do and we will try and give you the tools to make this happen."

David Cameron outlined what are to be the three major strands of Big Society which include:

"First, social action. The success of the Big Society will depend on the daily decisions of millions of people – on them giving their time, effort, even money, to causes around them. So government cannot remain neutral on that – it must foster and support a new culture of voluntarism, philanthropy, social action.

"Second, public service reform. We've got to get rid of the centralised bureaucracy that wastes money and undermines morale. And in its place we've got give professionals much more freedom, and open up public services to new providers like charities, social enterprises and private companies so we get more innovation, diversity and responsiveness to public need.

"And third, community empowerment. We need to create communities with oomph – neighbourhoods who are in charge of their own destiny, who feel if they club together and get involved they can shape the world around them."

Activities that are considered appropriate for community groups include post offices, libraries, transport and the shaping of housing projects.

Three techniques are proposed for the 'Big Society': Decentralisation, Transparency and providing Finance.

The full transcript of David Cameron's speech in Liverpool is available at:
www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2010/07/big-society-speech-53572

Lord Nat Wei has been appointed as the government's advisor on the 'Big Society'. He would like to see 5,000 Big Society community organisers appointed and trained and has advocated state organisations including the Sure Start Children's Centres becoming co-operatives.

The Five Elements of the Big Society

The Government has identified five elements of the 'Big Society':

1. Give communities more powers
 - We will radically reform the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live.
 - We will introduce new powers to help communities save local facilities and services threatened with closure, and give communities the right to bid to take over local state-run services.
 - We will train a new generation of community organisers and support the creation of neighbourhood groups across the UK, especially in the most deprived areas.
2. Encourage people to take an active role in their communities
 - We will take a range of measures to encourage volunteering and involvement in social action, including launching a national 'Big Society Day' and making regular community involvement a key element of civil service staff appraisals.
 - We will take a range of measures to encourage charitable giving and philanthropy.
 - We will introduce a National Citizen Service. The initial flagship project will provide a programme for 16 year olds to give them a chance to develop the skills needed to be active and responsible citizens, mix with people from different backgrounds, and start getting involved in their communities.
3. Transfer power from central to local government
 - We will promote the radical devolution of power and greater financial autonomy to local government, including a full review of local government finance.
 - We will give councils a general power of competence.
 - We will abolish Regional Spatial Strategies and return decision-making powers on housing and planning to local councils.
4. Support co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises
 - We will support the creation and expansion of mutuals, co-operatives, charities and social enterprises, and support these groups to have much greater involvement in the running of public services.

- We will give public sector workers a new right to form employee-owned co-operatives and bid to take over the services they deliver. This will empower millions of public sector workers to become their own boss and help them to deliver better services.
 - We will use funds from dormant bank accounts to establish a Big Society Bank, which will provide new finance for neighbourhood groups, charities, social enterprises and other nongovernmental bodies.
5. Publish government data
- We will create a new 'right to data' so that government-held datasets can be requested and used by the public, and then published on a regular basis.
 - We will oblige the police to publish detailed local crime data statistics every month, so the public can get proper information about crime in their neighbourhoods and hold the police to account for their performance.

The Big Society in Eden

One of the Vanguard Communities for the 'Big Society' is the Eden Valley in Cumbria where 'AWICS' is based. Eden has been selected as the rural vanguard area.

Eden has been chosen as a vanguard area for the Government's Big Society agenda because large parts of the community already work effectively with the District Council and other partners to improve the areas in which they live and work. It is generally considered that the 'Big Society' approach has already been developed in the Eden Valley.

Big Society, community empowerment and community engagement, regardless of the terminology, have all been happening in Eden for a very long time.

Eden's main approach to assisting the communities, particularly in the rural areas, is through supporting community led-planning. The Council has in place a Community Action Plan Protocol which is a simple agreement between the District Council, County Council, Action with Communities in Cumbria (ACT) and the Lake District National Park as to how groups wishing to develop their own Community Plan will be supported.

Eden District Council's Leader, Councillor Gordon Nicolson said:

"We have been working very closely to support and enable local people to plan their aspirations for their area, whether this is more affordable homes or securing the long-term availability of essential services for rural areas. We are helping local communities to take the lead to achieve their goals and to take the credit and pride from their achievements.

"We are pleased that this hard work has been recognised by the government and that Eden will be at the vanguard of government policy, which will enable us to help local communities carry out the ideas. Being able to directly access support and expertise from government departments and having the ear of Ministers will drive forward our communities and enable them to deliver their future aspirations.

"In Eden District in Cumbria, the Big Society is not a substitute for services at risk from cuts in public expenditure. It is all about harnessing the positive will and energy of local people to lead and deliver on their community's aspirations. This can range from more affordable housing to fighting to secure amenities such as the local pub."

The initial focus will be on three areas within Eden District and specifically on the community plans they have developed. The three areas are the Lyvennet Valley Community Plan, the Upper Eden Community Plan and the Heart of Eden Community Plan.

The key to success of the initiative will be working with the communities to help enable them to deliver their aspirations in the community plans.

It is essential that not only the three areas benefit from this intense focus but the knowledge and good practice is shared across the rest of the District and with other similar communities in the Country. As part of this commitment, it is intended to develop a fourth strand of work to assist individual communities to address issues in their localities and make the information on how we do this widely available.

The overall aim of the Vanguard Communities is to help the local communities by empowering them and removing unnecessary burdens of regulation with some financial support being offered by the newly created Big Society Bank.

Eden District Council's Chief Executive, Kevin Douglas said,

"We welcome the fact that we have been chosen as a pilot area, it's an honour and acknowledges the success of the Council in working in partnership with hard working communities and a range of other bodies. It is hoped that this will be a further opportunity to continue and build upon our work with local communities and places the area in a strong position to access funds from the Big Society Bank."

The local Member of Parliament is Rory Stewart MP who has been appointed 'Cumbrian Champion' by the Prime Minister. He said:

"Our communities already do an astonishing amount. This weekend alone, I met the mothers who built the Brough playground, saw the team at Crosby Ravensworth who are working on affordable housing and a community purchase of a pub, heard about Kirkby Stephen's plans to take over their community centre and met 120 volunteers who have supported the Northern Fells Group and its Fellrunner bus service at Caldbeck."

"There is much more that we can do together: I would like to see rural broadband rolled out with community help, for example. As an MP, my role should be to help give more freedom, resources and pride to local communities."

"But there is no template here. It is about allowing communities to do what they feel up to doing and giving them support when appropriate. We have a real struggle ahead to clear away paperwork and cut red tape to make it easier for communities."

"We are delighted to have such strong support from Cumbria County and Eden District Councils in this project."

"It reflects Cumbria's ancient traditions of self reliance, community action and independent mindedness.

"Penrith and the Border has a unique heritage of local parish networks, community groups, small businesses and voluntary organisations.

"Extraordinary organisations and individuals in Cumbria, both inside and outside local government, have been encouraging and supporting communities such as these for many years.

"We should give communities more freedom. Local communities know more, care more and can usually be much more effective than distant officials. I am delighted ministers are recognising Cumbria's unique strengths and are coming up to learn from Cumbrian communities."

Peter Thornton, Liberal Democrat County Councillor for Kirkby Stephen was quoted in the 'Cumberland & Westmorland Herald' as saying:

"I am especially pleased that the Upper Eden area has been chosen as one of the pilot projects... the Upper Eden Community Plan is an outstanding group and I am proud to be involved with it. We've always believed in the 'Big Society' but it's nice to see that the rest of the world is catching up with us here in Upper Eden."

The initial focus of the Big Society project in Eden will be in two areas: Crosby Ravensworth and the Upper Eden.

Crosby Ravensworth

Crosby Ravensworth has impressed the government with their plans to:

- Deliver a £2million affordable housing programme alongside the Council and other key partners
- The community has plans to purchase their local pub using a shares initiative
- Future plans for a community owned anaerobic digester to produce energy

In common with many Cumbrian villages, Crosby Ravensworth has seen a decline in the range of service available locally. In 2007, local people responded by launching a community plan and establishing the Lyvennet Community Trust to deliver change in Crosby Ravensworth and the neighbouring villages of Kings Meaburn, Maulds Meaburn and Reagill. Several projects have been identified including one to provide twenty affordable homes, one to provide an anaerobic digester to provide green energy and another to reopen the village's only pub – the 'Butcher's Arms'.

Doug Henderson, a local resident, was quoted in the 'Cumberland News' as saying:

"Crosby Ravensworth lost its shop years ago, its second pub, the post office and we almost lost the church... We realised if we didn't try to do something it would soon be a village with tumbleweed blowing down it like something out of a Wild West film."

The scheme for the 'Butcher's Arms' is for residents to establish a co-operative that will purchase the business. So far, 105 residents have each pledged £1,500 to gain a share in the pub and to keep it open. It is expected that volunteers will staff the pub. The housing scheme is considered in more detail below.

Joan Raine, the District Councillor for Crosby Ravensworth, said:

“Undoubtedly Crosby Ravensworth has the ‘X Factor’ and our community spirit is alive and kicking. We are working collectively to drive our community forward with many residents taking on a variety of roles to make things happen. We have welcomed visits by Rory Stewart MP, Nick Hurd MP and Lord Wei to Crosby Ravensworth to see the positive action that our community is taking and we are delighted to be part of the Big Society idea.”

Annie Kindleyside, Vice Chair of the Parish Council at Maulds Meaburn was quoted in the ‘Cumberland News’ as saying:

“What we are doing pre-dates (the Big Society) by a good four years.

“It’s already genuinely voluntary. People don’t want recompensed... The reward would be to see these projects work and what we need is support and help. Perhaps that help can come from the Big Society bank so we can have ground-up funding requests rather than decisions being taken from on high.

“We are seeking charitable registration for the Trust yet there are so many rules. It gets so complicated we hire a specialist solicitor and have had to spend thousands of pounds... Big Society could make things like this easier.

“I’m interested in the Big Society as long as it’s adding on to funding we already have and it makes good use of the money.

“If, for example, Cumbria Rural Housing Trust or Eden Council planning department get cut they might not be there to help us.

“If we are a true pilot scheme we’re happy to have people crawling over us and learning by it. If it’s just a flash show to distract attention from cutting services then no, we’re not interested.”

Lyvennet Community Trust – Housing Scheme

The Lyvennet Community Trust is the first of its nature in Cumbria and is run by eleven trustees drawn from the local community. It is working on a £2million project to deliver twelve new affordable homes and eight affordable ‘self-build’ homes. It is working with partners including Eden District Council that has given a £30,000 loan to finance some of the legal issues that surround the scheme. An anonymous benefactor has also donated £2,000 to help with the creation of affordable housing in the district. Social Housing Grant of £650,000 has been applied for with the support of Eden District Council.

David Graham, Chairman of the Lyvennet Community Trust was quoted in the ‘Cumberland & Westmorland Herald’ as saying:

“A housing needs survey carried out in the area identified 23 individuals and families in need of affordable homes in our community.

“Over the last fifteen months we have been working up our plans with the support of Eden to provide a community based solution... Eden Council has been an excellent partner... As well as this loan facility it part funds specialist support from Cumbria Rural Housing trust’s CLT officer who introduced us to the national Community Land Trust Fund and the Development Trust Association.

“The most challenging aspect has been securing the necessary funding so Eden’s support for our grant application to the Homes & Communities Agency has been important, and we are very pleased to have Eden Housing Association as development partners.”

Kevin Douglas, Chief Executive of Eden District Council was quoted in the ‘Cumberland & Westmorland Herald’ as saying:

“We are delighted to be able to support the Lyvennet Community Trust in developing affordable housing, this is the Council’s top priority.

“We are always looking for innovative work to create more affordable housing and by giving a £30,000 loan to the Lyvennet Community Trust they can unlock the potential of the brownfield site they are currently negotiating to buy.

“The money will be used to carry out various pre-development activities including surveys, legal costs associated with purchase and in securing the additional funding from government agencies and financial institutions.”

Lyvennet Community Trust has a website at www.lyvennetcommunitytrust.org.

Upper Eden

The government has highlighted the Upper Eden Community Plan which covers seventeen parishes and includes Kirkby Stephen Town Council. The government are keen to see what can be done to help the delivery of broadband in rural areas and assist the community in the delivery of the community centre.

Tom Woof, the Chairman of the Upper Eden Community Planning Group, said:

“This announcement both acknowledges and vindicates the work done by the Upper Eden Community Plan Group, its constituent Parishes, and others who have helped our Community Plan so far. It is a dream come true for any Community Group to be given a hotline to Government to help us overcome any problems we encounter in delivering the projects we are developing. We look forward to working with our ‘Bureaucracy Busters’ from Whitehall, and entering a bold new phase in community empowerment.”

One of the Upper Eden schemes is to facilitate the taking over of the community centre by the local community.

Reactions to the Big Society

Is the 'Big Society' anything new? Some have suggested not. For example, D Clark, a Trustee with the Simon Community wrote in the London Evening Standard that:

"The big news is that there's been a 'Big Society' around for years .It feels like the government has just discovered these community groups working away in the basement and brought them upstairs for a pat on the head."

The 'Cumberland News' commented in its editorial on 23rd July 2010 that:

"This week saw the launch of something big, something empowering and something that will take power away from central government and deliver it into the hands of individuals and communities.

"Many of us will remember lots of 'big things' in recent years. Former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair had his 'Big Conversation' in 2003 to gain public views.

"We have had the 'Big Ask' about climate change, the 'Big Tidy Up' for anti-litter campaigners and even, last Sunday, something called the 'Big Lunch' where neighbours were encouraged to eat together or throw street parties. Apparently one million people took part last year and one of the sponsors is the 'Big Lottery'.

"So, should we give our support?"

"Definitely. Especially as Cumbria is playing host to one of the four initial pilot projects in the Eden Valley.

"We are in an excellent position to lead the way and help make the idea of gaining more freedom from Westminster and loosening the national and local political grasp on our lives become a reality.

"There will be many from Brampton to Aspatria and Caldbeck to Carlisle who will say 'Amen to that' but add the comment that 'we do that already'.

"And it is true. While some feel that community spirit in Cumbria diminishes as the years roll by it is still very much the heartbeat of local life.

"Many do rally to help each other; giving support in adversity and many more volunteers prop up successful groups and societies.

"However, there are others who prefer to rely on the State and be told what to do and it will need these people to become involved if the 'Big Society' is not to be propped up by an enthusiastic minority."

The 'Cumberland & Westmorland Herald' commented in its editorial on 24th July 2010 that:

"A big noise was made about the announcement of the government's 'Big Society' initiative this week, but despite the fanfare, few people seem to know exactly what it entails.

"It is greatly to the credit of the residents of this area, however, that a small part of Eden has been chosen as one of the four pilot schemes in which community activities will be highlighted and supported so that the rest of the country can see how things can be achieved without over-reliance on the state.

"The Government and the Prime Minister in particular; wants communities, freed from over-regulation and red tape, to move forward by doing things for themselves. If all goes to plan, they should be able to access funding from a 'Big Society Bank' which will be a godsend for parishes in isolated areas who up until now have had to rely on public sector funding or, in many cases, a handout from the National Lottery and all the form filling that entails.

"Volunteers in the Eden Valley and other parts of the district are already driving their communities forward (which seems to be one of the Big Society buzz phrases) because in the past they have had to, knowing that sitting back and waiting for somebody else to do it for them was not an option. They know only too well that it has been a difficult job to get large amounts of public funding flowing through the Valley.

"At the moment 'Big Society' is more an ethos than an edict. The Government has sent some of its key figures to the area, including Nick Hurd, the Minister for Civil Society, who visited Crosby Ravensworth to see its community initiatives for himself; and Lord Wei, Big Society adviser, who was in Eden at the weekend to hear details of community planning groups in Kirkby Stephen and Appleby as well as help launch a new community minibus in the Caldbeck area; and they must have been impressed at what they saw. The only problem is that there are many examples of communities driving themselves forward in Cumbria, with the support of local authorities, and they must be looking on enviously while only a small area of Eden is singled out for special treatment – so far.

"Judging by the enthusiastic reception the Big Society principle has received from some of the key figures within the four pilot areas around the country; it seems to have a future. However, those communities currently on the outside looking in must be hoping it is rolled out to them as soon as possible as other public funding dries up."

Some communities in Cumbria that are outside the Vanguard Communities area have come forward with their own suggestions. Residents in Garrigill, a village with 200 residents near Alston, are hoping to reopen their village pub, the seventeenth century 'George & Dragon' as a co-operative. Mike Povey, who chairs the 'Save the George & Dragon Committee', was quoted in the 'Cumberland & Westmorland News' as saying:

"We see ourselves as a prime example of a community which already embodies all the values of the Big Society. We want to stress the need for communities to be supported by local and national government when they seek to take responsibility for their economy and for their social needs. Any smoothing of bureaucratic delays or obstacles will help us achieve our goals."

The National Council of Voluntary Organisations said:

“The ‘Big Society’ agenda takes includes a number of the priorities we had identified as key asks in our Good Society Manifesto. There are also parallels with many of the emerging themes, and those contained in our vision. However at this early stage in the process it is not always clear how these proposals will develop, and how they will fit with other policy objectives and priorities.”

Funding Issues

Concern has been expressed that the ‘Big Society’ may be used as a vehicle for encouraging community groups to deliver services that are currently provided by public organisations at a lower cost thus masking the effects of the government’s deficit reduction plan.

A spokesman for community groups in the Eden Valley was quoted in the ‘Cumberland & Westmorland Herald’ as saying:

“Local activists recognise that their voluntary efforts so far have been dependent for support from a range of charitable and public agencies such as Cumbria Rural Housing trust, Fells & Dales Local Action Group for the Rural Development Agency, Northwest Development Agency, Eden District Council and Cumbria County Council.

“If these bodies are part of the state which is to be cut back by at least 25% it will be difficult for them to maintain existing services and the volunteers have no intention of being used to cover up for cuts elsewhere.”

There is also a larger issue with funding. Many voluntary and community groups are currently dependent on grants from local authorities and other public agencies. For example, when I was Finance Director at Copeland Borough Council we were aware that it was often more cost effective to provide grants to voluntary organisations to assist them in providing services than it was to provide those services directly through the Council. Consequently the Council increased the financial contribution that it made to organisations including the Citizens’ Advice Bureaux thus enabling them to increase the range of services provided. Similarly, when I was Social Services Accountant at Newcastle-on-Tyne City Council significant grants were given to voluntary bodies to assist them in delivering social services. The danger is that, with local authorities and other public bodies looking for ways to make significant reductions in expenditure, cutting the budgets that support voluntary organisations and undermining the ‘Big Society’ may be the result.

J Rutter, formerly Head of Policy and Communications at ‘Refugee and Migrant Justice’ wrote in the London Evening Standard that:

“David Cameron wants to see charities run public services, start projects to improve their neighbourhoods and help the most vulnerable. But spending cuts may weaken the very sector Cameron claims to support. Most... charities rely on local authorities for a large proportion of their funding. With pressure to make such large cuts, charities present an easy target to a local authority accountant, and small local initiatives which may lack a loud campaigning voice seem most at risk.

“Funding cuts mean that we could easily lose the most innovative organisations, those that support the most vulnerable or which save the taxpayer by tackling the root causes of social ills.”

Conclusions

The choice of the term ‘Big Society’ for this initiative is interesting. It is obviously designed to contrast with the ‘Big Government’ that the Labour Party is accused of advocating, but it also appears to suggest that the Conservative Party has changed its approach since it was last in power between 1979 and 1997. At that time, Margaret Thatcher famously defined Conservatism as the belief that there was no such thing as society, only individuals. In advocating a ‘Big Society’, David Cameron can be seen to be distancing himself from the beliefs of Margaret Thatcher. David Cameron also refers to the ‘Broken Society’ and this prompts the thought that one of the reasons why society may be broken is that for a significant period of time those in authority denied that it existed.

But what is the ‘Big Society’? Many people have pointed out that the ‘Big Society’ already exists. This is not only the case in Eden and the other Vanguard Communities areas but is the case across the country. Large numbers of people do unpaid work for their communities. This week, for example, I have been in Lambeth working with people who give their time voluntarily to Tenant Management Organisations and in Workington where I am a member of the Board of a charitable housing association made up of volunteers from among residents and the local community. National politicians have praised people who have voluntarily promoted affordable housing and saved village pubs but it is clear that these people want more than praise – and if that is all that they will get the ‘Big Society’ will make little difference on the ground.

There appears to be a perception in some quarters that the ‘Big Society’ will provide an additional funding stream for community projects. Insofar as a ‘Big Society Bank’ is proposed it will. However, at the same time other funding streams will be reduced as a consequence of the deficit reduction plan. Community and voluntary organisations are likely to find themselves being asked to provide more services with fewer resources. The government has promised a reduction in ‘red tape’ but specific proposals regarding how this is to be achieved have yet to emerge.

Cynics complain that the ‘Big Society’ is there to distract attention from the deficit reduction plan; or that it is even part of the deficit reduction plan. The fear is that the ‘Big Society’ will boil down to government, local authorities and public organisations saying to local communities that if they want to keep a service they will have to find a way of running it themselves using volunteers and funding that they can raise themselves. For example, if you want to keep the Museum or the Library, those who are interested will have to form a Trust, do some fundraising and staff the museum or library as volunteers.

While there is community and voluntary activity in all parts of Britain, some consideration needs to be given to the different needs of different areas. The cases where village residents work together to ensure that local pubs remain open as a focus for the village community are often cited as good examples of the 'Big Society' in action. In the case of Crosby Ravensworth, residents have found £1,500 each to buy their share in the proposed pub co-operative. It would probably not be possible for a more deprived community to raise this sort of capital. This raises the prospect of the 'Big Society' becoming a vehicle for affluent communities to help themselves, while deprived communities have the same opportunities in theory but not in practice. The government has stated that it is committed to fairness so it will presumably want to find a way to ensure that this does not happen.

There is also a need to ensure that minority groups are not excluded from the 'Big Society'. We are already seeing reduced resources in both the public and voluntary sectors for schemes that assist groups including people with alcohol or drug problems or people fleeing domestic violence. It is often difficult to attract widespread public support for such schemes but it can be argued that the test of any society – let alone a 'Big Society' – is how it treats minority, marginal and 'unpopular' groups.

A more imaginative way of addressing the 'Big Society' and the deficit reduction plan simultaneously would be to increase resources available to support community and voluntary organisations thus enabling them to deliver a broader range of services than are currently provided by statutory bodies. The voluntary and third sector have always had a lot to offer and they may hold the key to the question of how to continue to provide services during a recession in which there are significant reductions in public expenditure. Parish Councils also have a role to play as democratically accountable organisations with clear links to local communities and access to voluntary support.

I recently met the co-ordinator of one of the Eden Local Plans in the local Building Society. He told me that despite having been to the Liverpool launch of the 'Big Society' and having had a number of meetings with ministers and government advisors he was still unclear what the 'Big Society' was all about. He even went so far as to say that he did not believe that David Cameron knew yet what it was all about. If the 'Big Society' is a 'work in progress' this presents a significant opportunity to those who are involved in community or voluntary work. To take advantage of this opportunity, community and voluntary organisations should step forward to say what they can do to achieve the 'Big Society' and what support they need from government to achieve it. If they do this the 'Big Society' may turn out to be what they want. If they don't it may turn out to be something else!

Adrian Waite
August 2010