

## INTERIM REPORT OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW PANEL ON THE BIG SOCIETY

### REPORT OF THE REVIEW PANEL

#### Purpose of the Report

1. This report sets out the initial findings of the Scrutiny Review Panel's consideration of the Government's Big Society concept.

#### Scope of the Review

2. The Scrutiny Commissioners on 29 September 2010 appointed a Scrutiny Review Panel to begin consideration of the Government's emerging Big Society Agenda and its implications for the County Council. Its aim was to identify suitable policy priorities and to consider how, with other partners, Leicestershire County Council can help to support and engage with the voluntary and community sector to assist in the delivery of the Big Society.
3. The issue of the funding of the seven voluntary sector hubs and the award of the infrastructure contract to VAL and the respective roles of VAL and the hubs were outside this scope of this review.

#### Membership of the Panel

4. The following members were appointed to serve on the Panel.

Mr. A. D. Bailey CC  
Dr. S. Hill CC  
Mr. Max Hunt CC  
Mr. B. L. Pain CC

Mrs. C. M. Radford CC  
Mr. P. A. Roffey CC  
Mr. R. J. Shepherd CC

Deputy Commissioner Mr Pain CC was elected Chairman by the Panel.

#### Conduct of the Review

5. The Panel met on four occasions between 16 November 2010 and 5 January 2011. The Panel, during the course of the review:
  - (a) Considered a presentation from VAL on the voluntary sector view of the Big Society and its implications;
  - (b) Held an all member workshop on the four aspirations of the "Big Society";

- (c) Considered the outcome of the programme of ‘Big Conversation about the Big Society’ events held amongst Council staff and some Community Forums.

Only limited evidence has been collected to date due to the short timescales but various local organisations have been asked to provide evidence, including Billesdon Community Shop and Post Office, Albert Village Nursery Campaign, Clockwise Credit Union and the Co-operative and Social Enterprise Development Agency, and the Panel will consider responses received when it is reconvened in the next stage of the review process.

6. The Panel was supported in its review by the following persons and is thankful to them for their contributions:

Mary Hall	Districts Manager, Voluntary Action Leicestershire
Becky Nixon	Deputy Chief Executive, VAL
Rajo Saira	Stronger Communities Co-ordinator, VAL
Simon McIntosh	Group Manager, Community & Places, Leicestershire County Council
Nicole Rickard	Team Leader, Policy & Partnerships, Leicestershire County Council
Joanne Twomey	Committee Officer, Leicestershire County Council
Sam Weston	Committee Officer, Leicestershire County Council

### **The Big Society Policy Agenda**

*“Big government has failed to solve problems of social breakdown and deprivation...Big Society is needed to create a better, more responsive and active society...a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities.” May 2009*

*“The Big Society is “to give citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want.” 18 May 2009*

**David Cameron**

7. In launching the Big Society agenda, the Government sought to shift power from politicians to people. To achieve this, it outlined the following three core components:
- (a) **Empowering communities:** giving local councils and neighbourhoods more power to take decisions and shape their area.
  - (b) **Opening up public services:** the Government’s public service reforms will enable charities, social enterprises, private companies and employee-owned co-operatives to compete to offer people high quality

services.

**(c) Promoting social action:** encouraging and enabling people from all walks of life to play a more active part in society and promoting more volunteering and philanthropy.

8. The Government aims to use 'localist approaches to deliver economic, social and political success'<sup>1</sup> by providing a range of new opportunities to help communities shape and provide innovative, bottom-up services where it is considered that state provision has failed.

9. Subsequent to the General Election, the Coalition Government established an Office of the Civil Society (previously Third Sector) within the Cabinet Office to lead in the Big Society. It published a briefing note entitled '*Building the Big Society*'<sup>2</sup> in May 2010. This document outlined the following agreed policies to start to enable the Big Society agenda to be delivered:

(a) Giving communities more powers

There will be greater freedom for local government to take decisions relating to planning and how budgets are spent, with far less national-level inspection and assessment. This includes the abolition of the Comprehensive Area Assessment, Audit Commission and National Indicator Set. There will also be new powers for communities to save and run community facilities and the establishment of a network of community organisers.

(b) Encouraging people to take an active role in their communities

Communities are to play a leading role in local decision-making and in holding local government to account. There will be a new emphasis on volunteering and social action and a focus on social responsibility driving change. A National Citizen Service for young people will be introduced.

(c) Transferring power from central to local government

There is to be a reduction in the extent and powers of regional government and these powers will be given back to local councils. This has been evidenced so far by emda and Government Office East Midlands both being disbanded. Council's will have a general power of competence and Regional Spatial Strategies are to be abolished, with a return to decision-making powers on housing and planning to local council's.

(d) Supporting co-ops, mutual, charities and social enterprises

There is to be an emphasis on the importance of mutuals, social enterprises, charities and other voluntary and community groups and their role in service

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<sup>1</sup> The Conservative Party Localism Green Paper No 9 Control Shift: Returning power to local communities, February 2009

<sup>2</sup> Building the Big Society, Cabinet Office, May 2010

delivery. Across many service areas, a new right to form employee-owned mutuals is intended to empower many public sector workers to become their own boss and help them deliver better services in partnership with the communities in which they work.

(e) Publishing government data

There is to be a new 'right to data' so that government held datasets are published on a regular basis and can be requested and used by the public.

10. In October 2010 the Cabinet Office published a strategy document called "Building a Stronger Civil Society".<sup>3</sup> This was described as the first step towards helping civil society organisations grasp new opportunities arising from the massive devolution of power to local communities and reform of public services that underpins the Big Society.
11. The Office of the Civil Society also published a Green Paper in December 2010 called "Modernising Commissioning" calling on contributions on how the role of charities, social enterprises, mutuals and cooperatives can be facilitated in public service delivery.
12. 'Vanguard communities' (i.e. pilot communities) have been assigned in Windsor and Maidenhead, Eden Valley in Cumbria, Liverpool and the London Borough of Sutton.
13. The published 'Big Society' agenda, whilst high level, is still relatively brief. The Government is not being prescriptive on measures to be adopted and in keeping with its localism approach, is leaving local authorities, partners and communities to develop their own detailed implementation plans. The Decentralisation and Localism Bill was published on 13 December 2010 but further guidance is still awaited from the Government. It was agreed that further scrutiny of these key documents were necessary before detailed actions could be finalised and that there was therefore a need for the Review to continue in the New Year.

**The Big Society in Leicestershire**

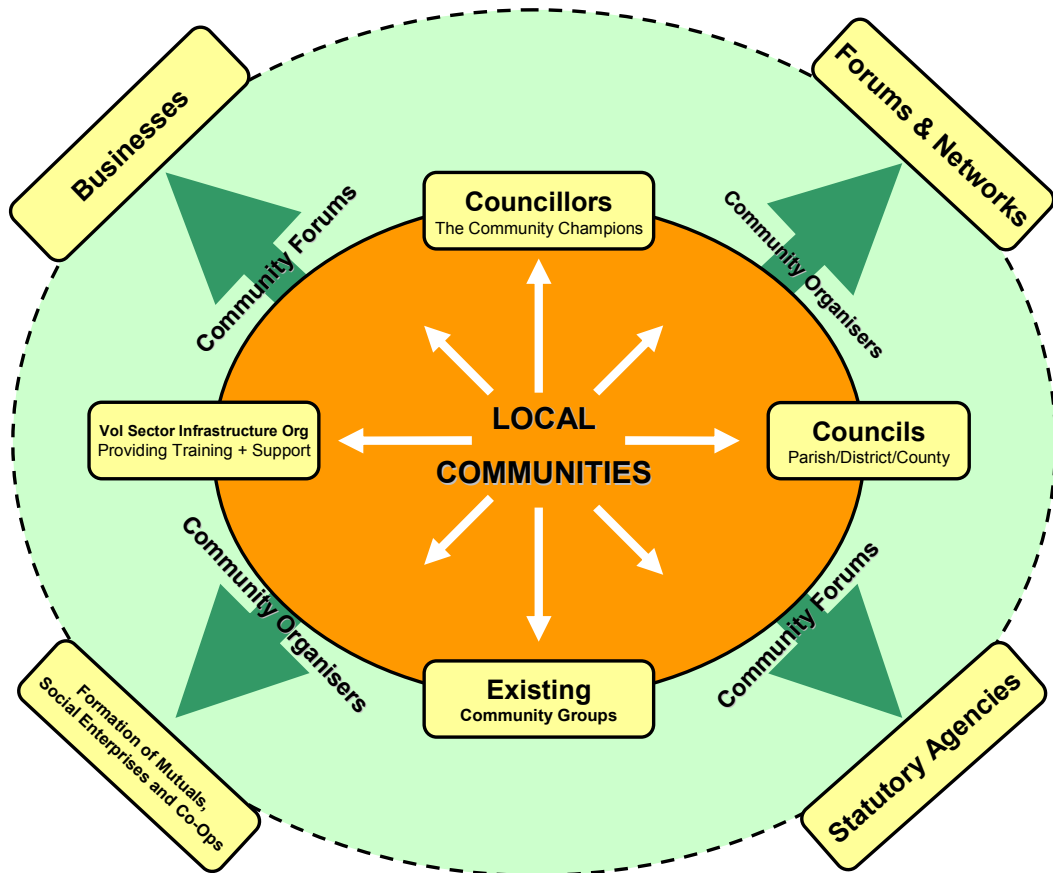
14. The Panel acknowledged that local government had a central role to play in facilitating the delivery of the Big Society across Leicestershire. Although still in its early stages, the Panel feels that the County Council needs to be proactive in helping develop the concepts and local policy that will make the 'Big Society' a reality. The Panel therefore considered what the 'Big Society' will mean locally, what the key issues are, what may be the main barriers to its success and what could be done to start to address these.
15. As part of this review, the Panel asked the following questions:

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<sup>3</sup> Building a Stronger Civil Society, Oct 2010

- What groups existed and what action was already being taken in Leicestershire to address Big Society issues?
- How could the County Council work with and support voluntary and community groups to deliver the Big Society?
- How could the County Council prepare for the Decentralisation and Localism Act?
- What role would councillors play in the Big Society?
- What governance and accountability arrangements would be put in place to oversee Big Society initiatives?
- How the infrastructure currently in place across the Leicestershire public sector could be adapted to support the Big Society initiatives?
- How gaps in departmental service provision resulting from the need to make savings might be addressed through devolving responsibility to local communities and groups as part of the Big Society agenda.

16. The Panel agreed that the essence of the Big Society was about people becoming involved in community and voluntary activities. Such activities may complement existing local authority services or in some cases come to replace them. The Panel felt that a relatively flexible structure was needed to facilitate ideas from community groups and individuals. The diagram below outlines how this may look locally:



17. The Panel acknowledged that 'local communities' need to be at the heart of this structure. The direction of the Big Society in any locality should therefore be set by communities themselves rather than by one or more public agencies. However, the Panel feels the County Council has a key role to play in facilitating and supporting the implementation of today's key political agenda. It is important that the County Council helps to create an environment in which it is easier for communities to do things for themselves, around issues that are important to them. It is also important that it helps to build community confidence and works to provide the support that would facilitate the implementation of the 'Big Society' policy agenda. Leicestershire Together had already engaged significant capital in this area through the Stronger Communities Board.
  
18. For ease of reading, the Panel's interim recommendations – the things that they believe need to happen to effectively support 'Big Society' – are shown against three of the four specific aspirations used by the County Council and partners to consult on the Big Society (the fourth is a principle around people and organisations working together to grow the Big Society). These aspirations are more 'user friendly' versions of the components outlined in paragraph 9 and were seen as an understandable way of explaining the ideas behind 'Big Society' to staff, partners and the public:
  - ❖ Everyone can be involved in their community if they wish
  - ❖ Everyone has opportunities to influence decisions that affect them
  - ❖ Local people are able to shape and deliver public services

**Aspiration 1: Helping everyone to be involved in their community if they wish**

19. It became clear through the Panel's few meetings that, at present, Government proposals for the 'Big Society' were still very much in their early stages. Of the few confirmed proposals at that time were plans for 'Community Organisers' (COs) who would act as co-ordinators, organising and supporting voluntary activities across a borough/district. It was anticipated that, of the 5,000 COs in the UK, 500 would be 'full-time' (raising the funding for their own role) with the remaining 4,500 acting on a 'part-time', voluntary basis (it was expected that this would equate to one 'full-time' CO per borough/district with the support of around five 'part-time' COs).
  
20. The Panel was made aware of the Stronger Communities Co-ordinators who were already employed and based in districts/boroughs across Leicestershire. These Co-ordinators carried out what appeared to be a similar role to that planned for the COs. Unfortunately, funding for these posts (via the recently abolished Local Area Agreement) would soon cease and their posts would end in March 2011.
  
21. The Panel felt that an agenda aimed at placing power at the heart of communities meant that the Council should adopt a 'light touch' approach and, along with local voluntary and community sector organisations and public sector partners, play an 'enabler' or 'facilitator' role. It was envisaged

that as part of this role, the Council and other agencies should remove some of the barriers to people being involved in their community i.e. volunteering by taking some of the more bureaucratic and procedural matters out of the hands of volunteers and ensuring that volunteers feel valued and supported. Increasing volunteering was already a priority area for the Council, however, the Leicestershire Together Volunteering Strategy and Action Plan would need to be adopted and implemented by all Leicestershire Together partners in order to achieve a unified approach to supporting volunteering in the County. It was recognised by the Panel that those members of the public who did not wish to engage in the Big Society should be allowed to do precisely that.

**The Panel recommends that:**

- (a) The County Council and its partners should explore opportunities to provide resources to support the identification and support of Community Organisers (COs). Small amounts of funding could be provided to assist COs in securing sustainable funding for their posts from other sources;
- (b) A 'single approach' to working with volunteers should be developed for the County Council – particularly in regard to advertising, recruitment, training, policies and procedures, networking and expenses;
- (c) All relevant future infrastructure and service delivery contracts with VCS organisations should include 'Big Society' considerations, including their specific role in helping to deliver the four local aspirations and ensuring that groups and communities deemed to be 'hard to reach' receive the necessary support to engage in the 'Big Society';
- (d) A training programme could be developed for customer-facing staff across all sectors to assist them in providing information and signposting those wishing to be involved to the appropriate organisations.

**Aspiration 2: Providing opportunities for people to influence decisions that affect them**

22. Though with varying levels of success depending on the area, some Community/Area Forums had begun to establish themselves as an effective engagement tool for the Council and other key service providers. However, there was a degree of frustration from members of the public that the Forums were overly focused on the strategic documents/priorities of the County Council and partners, rather than localised issues that directly affected residents and were seen by them as a priority. The Panel feels that Community Forums need to adapt/improve in order to play an active and effective role in 'Big Society'. The Panel felt that there were opportunities to expand the role of Forums to become a key point of contact for VCS organisations to engage and consult with the public. Through these, the public could become involved in decision making and shaping local service

delivery. The Forums could also be developed as a means to provide local residents with information about opportunities for involvement in their area.

23. Before anyone can fully participate in decision making processes, there must be a common understanding of what decisions are open to influence and the implications of such decisions. The County Council has a clear role to play in providing greater transparency as to the opportunities for community views to be sought on key decisions
24. Different communities will respond to the new agenda of voluntarism and self-help in various ways. Vulnerable and deprived sections of society will need more help than others (the Panel makes a recommendation which responds to this issue above (recommendation (c))). Others will not be aware of opportunities that may be open to them, including the Leicestershire Working Together Forum which includes representatives from key communities of interest in Leicestershire. To counteract this we need to use a range of different mechanisms to engage with our communities and ensure that we maximise the opportunities offered by existing local networks, groups and events. It was felt that councillors – at parish, district and County level – have a bigger role to play than ever before as “Community Champions”, acting as a key local contact point and offering advice and signposting to organisations supporting ‘Big Society’ activity e.g. advice on funding, structures or volunteering opportunities.

**The Panel recommends that:**

- (e) Engagement in Community Forums should be developed to its full potential, with Forum meeting agendas focussing on local priorities, as well as those of public sector organisations. There should be encouragement for all Leicestershire Together partners to increase levels of engagement with and resources made available to, the Forums over the coming months;
- (f) Participatory budgeting sessions via Community Forums assist in empowering communities to make choices about services in their area. The participatory budgeting approach should therefore ideally be extended to cover mainstream services, with the aim of involving communities in key service prioritisation decisions;
- (g) A forward plan should be produced of key decisions at a partnership, corporate and departmental level;
- (h) In order to empower communities of interest, as well as those of geography, further work needs to be done to signpost those communities to their nominated VCS representative organisations and the Leicestershire Together Working Forum.



### **Aspiration 3: Helping Local People to Shape and Deliver Public Services**

25. The Panel was pleased to note, from case studies discussed at the Panel meetings (specifically as part of the VAL presentation), that a lot of positive 'Big Society' work was already taking place in the County. The Panel heard of examples in Billesdon where the local community had established a community Post Office overseen by a board of trustees and an example in the Vale of Belvoir where a local community had received support from the Council and other organisations in its pursuit of a faster and more reliable broadband service.
26. Given the indications that some communities were clearly keen to take part in a 'Big Society', the Panel felt it was essential that this work was built upon and more was learnt from their experiences in order that the Council and other key agencies get a better understanding of how they could better cater for these groups in the future.
27. Work had already been carried out by VAL and the County Council to map community service delivery. Going forward it would be necessary to build on this work to ensure that there was a 'directory' of services which would prevent an overlap of service provision and enable accurate signposting for those wishing to become involved.
28. A big part of the 'Big Society' agenda was the formation of mutuals, social enterprises and co-operatives. The Panel noted that, as yet, these had not flourished in Leicestershire, although the reason for this is not entirely clear. It was therefore essential that those with the expertise were enabled to provide assistance in this area, that examples of good practice were made available and that any skills gaps are identified and addressed, for example through relevant training.
29. The Panel were provided with a document from the Church of England which outlined the intention to position churches as 'community hubs'.<sup>4</sup>The Panel felt that this was a very practical suggestion, given their established position within communities and that faith communities had a role to play in facilitating the 'Big Society' which the Panel were keen to explore further.. Similarly, other parish buildings would provide well established bases from which community groups could meet and even provide services from.
30. As part of its work, the Panel asked the various heads of service within the Council to have consideration for any areas where, going forward, gaps in service provision may emerge. Though at the time of writing, this information had yet to be gathered, it would be of paramount importance that any gaps were given consideration as part of the Council's budget setting process early in the New Year.

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<sup>4</sup> ["The Big Society and the Church of England". GS1804](#), October 2010

**The Panel recommends that:**

- (i) Guidance should be produced by the Council and partners on what communities and organisations could achieve in terms of delivering services, illustrated with case studies and examples of good practice to provide inspiration and direction on sources of help and advice, with a particular focus on potential “right to bid” (to run services) and “right to buy” projects;
- (j) Work to map the extent of community involvement in service delivery in Leicestershire, in order to identify potential services in the County, that could be delivered as/more effectively at community level, should be completed;
- (k) The Council and VAL are currently undertaking mapping of mutual, social enterprise and co-operative activity in the County. The next stage is to identify the specific advice/support required to support and grow this sector in Leicestershire, including the formation of new social enterprises and co-operatives, and explore how these advice/support needs could be addressed.

**Facilitation and Funding**

31. The Panel noted issues in respect of the allocation of funding to VCS organisations and that the Council had a role to play in ensuring that it was utilised for the benefit of the whole area, rather than those with vocal, well organised and active groups, except in instances where it was a conscious decision to do so – such as targeting priority neighbourhoods.

**Responsibility and Regulation**

32. Whilst the aim to devolve power to local communities was viewed by the Panel to be wholly admirable and that there are clearly lots of examples of local groups delivering well, it was felt that along with rights come responsibilities and that it is essential that the necessary checks and balances were in place to ensure that service delivery was of an excellent standard and carried out by competent and appropriate individuals.
33. The Council clearly had a role to play in ensuring that the necessary checks, such as CRB, were carried out before individuals could, for instance, work with children, although there is clearly further scope for simplification of red tape, rules and regulations. VAL already provided some assistance in this area and, going forward, the Council, VCS organisations and other agencies need to have clearer roles and responsibilities.

**The Panel recommends that:**

- (I) It is important to establish some 'basic standards' of service provision and then fulfil an overview and 'monitoring' role to assess who is most appropriate to undertake work, whilst maintaining a 'light touch' approach.

**Resources Implications**

The Big Society initiative will be dependant upon pump priming resources and support in kind in order to maximise its success. It is proposed that a risk assessment should be undertaken in order to identify key risks to the effective delivery of Big Society in Leicestershire.

**Equal Opportunities**

A number of the proposals in this report make reference to communication with all communities, especially those deemed to be hard to reach, in order that everyone has an equal opportunity to engage in the Big Society agenda.

**Circulation under the Local Issues Alerts Procedure**

None.

**Background Papers**

Report to the Cabinet dated 16 November 2010 – Community Forum Participatory Budgeting Pilot – Interim Evaluation

**Recommendations**

The Scrutiny Commission is recommended to support:

- (a) the interim findings of the Panel and refer these to the Cabinet for its consideration;
- (b) the need to continue work to address the Big Society policy agenda and for the Panel to reconvene in 2011 to complete their work with particular reference to:
- The Localism Bill and other key emerging documents;
  - Evidence from various voluntary organisations, the Interfaith Forum for Leicestershire, District and Borough Councils and County Council departments;

- Consideration of the risks associated with the effective delivery of the 'Big Society';
- Consideration of the measurability of outcomes;
- More information about mutuals, social enterprises and co-operatives;
- Consideration about the "rights and responsibilities" inherent in the 'Big Society' concept

**Mr. B. L. Pain CC**  
**Chairman of the Panel**