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BRIDGE BIG SOCIETY "GAP" WARNS FIRST EVER BIG SOCIETY AUDIT

GOVERNMENT MUST WORK WITH VOLUNTARY SECTOR FOR BIG SOCIETY TO SUCCEED

The Government's Big Society initiative must target poorer communities and young and ethnic minority people, working in genuine partnership with the voluntary sector, if it is to succeed. So finds the first ever independent audit of David Cameron's flagship programme, published today, almost two years to the day since the Coalition Government was formed.

The Audit finds a 'Big Society gap' between different groups against key indicators. For example:

- **Deprived versus affluent communities:** 51% of people in the most deprived areas say their neighbourhood pulls together to improve it, compared to 78% in the most affluent;
- **Younger and older people:** 55% of 16-24 year olds say that people in their neighbourhood pulls together, compared to 73% of people over 65; Volunteers are more likely to be middle aged and middle class;
- **White and ethnic minority people:** 52% of white people say that many people in their neighbourhood can be trusted, against 27% from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Government failure to get 'buy in' from others to the Big Society is a major potential obstacle to bridging that gap, the Audit finds, and the Government needs to work more closely with the voluntary sector, providing the right support,

especially in deprived areas which are being particularly hit by Government cuts.

Far from being strengthened in the first two years of the Big Society, the voluntary sector is facing £3.3 billion of cuts in public funding up to 2016. Voluntary organisations working with disadvantaged groups in deprived areas are more likely to depend on statutory funding but local authorities with the highest levels of deprivation in England suffered the deepest cuts in spending in 2011-2012.

Despite various Government initiatives to stimulate new funding for the sector, the Audit concludes that extra funds from donations are unlikely to fill this funding hole, with levels of giving to charities by individuals already high.

The Audit found that small, local voluntary and community organisations find it hard to gain Government contracts, as tendering practices seem to have an implicit bias toward larger organisations, mainly in the private sector. For example, requirements in the Work Programme, described as a flagship Big Society programme, seemed to favour the private sector, which won 90 per cent of prime contracts in 2011.

The principal author and Director of Civil Exchange, Caroline Slocock, said:

“The Audit found a genuine interest in getting involved in local issues and in supporting charities but also a ‘Big Society gap’ between younger and older people and deprived and affluent communities. For example, far fewer younger people and people in deprived areas think that their neighbourhoods are pulling together to improve it. The Government needs to engage with the voluntary sector as a key partner if it is to bridge this gap. That means forging common goals, ensuring the sector has the right support and giving fair access to Government contracts. It is ironic that a programme to engage communities is being driven from Whitehall.”

The Audit is produced by think tank Civil Exchange, with research and communications support from Democratic Audit and DHA, and backed by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation UK.

Andrew Barnett, Director of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation UK, said: “In our commitment to enrich and connect people’s lives, the notion of The Big Society – devolved, connected and resilient – has considerable relevance; we hope it will result in real difference for the better. The Audit will provide a benchmark against which the Government and others can be held to account, ensuring that people and communities everywhere benefit.”

Stephen Pittam, Trust Secretary of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust said: “This evidence-based assessment allows us all to judge whether a genuine transfer of power from government to civil society is occurring, or just responsibilities and the consequent blame. It is an important audit.”

Other Audit findings include:

- Over half of people think that change can happen by getting involved locally, compared to just 30 per cent nationally;
- Membership of the 3 main nature charities is 5 million, compared to only half a million people who are members of the 3 main political parties;
- 40 per cent of the population almost never trust British Governments to place the needs of the nation above their own party but 75 per cent of people think most charities are trustworthy;
- The UK already has one of the most developed and largest public service industries in the world and public trust in the NHS and education is high;
- 60% of people donated to charity in the last month, 2nd in the world, but the UK was 21st out of 110 countries in its levels of volunteering.

The Big Society Audit is designed to set a baseline for future change, capturing initiatives underway for some time under successive Governments– and picked up by the Big Society – on the goals of community empowerment, opening up public services and social action. It uses a range of indicators and draws on over forty data sources to show the extent to which these goals are being met.

The report recommends that:

- the Government should develop and deliver clear Big Society goals with key partners, including the voluntary and community sector, for example, around poverty reduction and ensuring equal life chances.
- Opportunities to deliver public services should avoid bias toward the private sector and ensure fair access to the voluntary sector.
- Central and local government should increase their understanding of how the voluntary and community sector works, including through interchange of staff, training and more joint initiatives.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

For a copy of the Big Society Audit, interviews with the author and further information, please contact: Daniel Harris on 0207 793 4035, daniel@dhacommunications.co.uk

Civil Exchange is a think tank established last year to strengthen civil society's connection to government. It links up with other organisations on particular projects to bring together existing expertise and knowledge. It aims to be a catalyst to help civil society and government work together in new ways and a resource for research, policy development, capacity building, awareness-raising and exchange.

www.civilexchange.org.uk

Democratic Audit is an independent research organisation which audits democracy and human rights in the UK and publishes an annual Democratic Audit designed to assess the quality of democracy in the UK and to identify what reforms are needed to democratise their country further. It is grant-funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. Dr Wilks-Heeg is also a Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at Liverpool University.

www.democraticaudit.com

DHA is a policy and communications agency specialising in social change. It works solely with public and not for profit sector organisations across a range of sectors, including with the voluntary sector, trusts and foundations, think tanks and government. www.dhacommunications.co.uk

The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust is an independent, progressive organisation committed to funding radical change towards a better world. The JRCT makes grants to individuals and to projects seeking the creation of a peaceful world, political equality and social justice. www.jrct.org.uk

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is an international charitable foundation with cultural, educational, social and scientific interests. Based in Lisbon with offices in London and Paris, the Foundation is in a privileged position to support national and transnational work tackling contemporary issues. The purpose of the UK Branch in London is to connect and enrich the experiences of individuals, families and communities, with a special interest in supporting those who are most disadvantaged. www.gulbenkian.org.uk