



CIVIL EXCHANGE

Strengthening Society's Connection to Government

THE BIG SOCIETY AUDIT 2013

Executive Summary

Acknowledgements

Text and graphics copyright Civil Exchange, 2013.

Published by Civil Exchange, in partnership with DHA Communications.

The principal author is Caroline Slocock, with research by Ruth Hayes and Pete Bass, and editorial input and many of the case studies by David Harker.

Editing was by Daniel Harris, Managing Director, DHA.

Design by DHA.

The Audit is supported by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Barrow Cadbury Trust.

Civil Exchange is a think tank that seeks 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

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

The Barrow Cadbury Trust is an independent charitable foundation, committed to supporting vulnerable and marginalised people in society. The Trust promotes social justice through grant making, research, influencing public opinion and policy and supporting local communities. It provides grants to grassroots voluntary and community groups working in deprived communities in the UK, with a focus on Birmingham and the Black Country. It also works with researchers, think tanks and government, often in partnership with other grant-makers, seeking to overcome the structural barriers to a more just and equal society.

Executive Summary

‘Today is the start of a deep, serious reform agenda to take power away from politicians and give it to people.’

David Cameron, announcing the Big Society, May 2010 ¹

Voluntary and community organisations continue to inspire huge public support but it is largely the private sector to which the Government has turned

Many people continue to turn to civil society as a positive force for social change

Introduction

1. Across the country, communities are taking control of their own assets, from shops, to pubs, libraries and even piers. Voluntary and community organisations continue to inspire huge amounts of public support. Councils are also forming new partnerships in communities to tackle deep social problems. But in the reform of public services, it is largely the private sector to which the Government has turned, although large companies have recently come under fire for the way they run those services. At the same time, many specialist and local voluntary organisations that help address the symptoms of a socially and economically divided society are being left out in the cold.

2. Deep questions are also being asked about just how accountable and responsive key public services are, as they demonstrate financial efficiency but show a lack of basic care.

3. This is the territory surveyed by this second Big Society Audit, which looks beyond the deeply polarised debate about its merits to what is actually happening on the ground. It shows that the Big Society can be inspiring, but is also failing to live up to its own rhetoric in key areas.

4. The Big Society is one of the Coalition Government’s big political ideas, launched with many good intentions and followed by numerous initiatives. Although some have declared it dead, it isn’t going away. Not only has it spawned many new initiatives with real impact on the ground, many people - politicians, senior business men, religious leaders and civil society itself - are also continuing to turn to civil society as a positive force for social change at a time when trust in other key institutions has declined.

5. The Big Society Audit focuses on three key strands identified by the Government as key to its delivery when it was launched: community empowerment, opening up public services and social action. The Audit looks at each strand and assesses progress against key indicators, to see how and whether action has lived up to these aspirations.

Assessment against the indicators

6. Each of the three strands are assessed below, with **positives in orange**, negatives in black.

¹Words from a seminar to launch the initiative at Downing Street, 18 May 2010

Communities are taking over vital assets and services

A significant proportion of voluntary organisations are experiencing financial difficulty

Public service outsourcing is dominated by large private sector companies, though some new forms of delivery are also taking hold

Community empowerment: the indicators

1. Individual influence over local decisions – no real change.

Most people recognise the importance of influencing local decisions but only a minority feel they can.

2. Increased local control – mostly positive.

Communities are taking over vital assets and services locally and local authorities are working in new partnerships in England to tackle key social issues. But central government has taken control of Academies away from local authorities, is still inclined to micro-manage and devolution is in its infancy in England.

3. Greater transparency and accountability – mostly positive.

The amount of publicly available information has increased; and there are more elected officials. But electoral interest has been low and central government data has been criticised for lack of transparency and accessibility. Initiatives to engage the public, taken over many years, are having no impact on widespread disengagement with politics.

4. Stronger communities – mostly positive.

This remains a broadly positive feature of British life, although the picture varies between affluent and disadvantaged, rural and urban communities.

5. Voluntary sector strength and influence – mostly negative.

Despite an underlying resilience, with voluntary and community organisations continuing to carry out a key social role, a significant proportion are experiencing financial difficulty due to rising demand and falling income.

Opening up public services: the indicators

1. Diversification – largely negative.

Public service outsourcing is dominated by large private sector companies, though some new forms of public ownership and delivery are also taking hold.

2. Voluntary sector funding – largely negative.

Many cuts in state funding have already fallen on the voluntary sector and dramatic falls are estimated over the next 4 years, with many organisations working with vulnerable people, often in disadvantaged areas, under serious threat. Government is seeking to increase social and other finance to the sector but this is unlikely to be large enough to fill this gap.

3. More accountable and responsive public services – largely negative.

High profile failings in key public services have recently been uncovered, particularly amongst large private sector contractors, and questions have been raised about standards of basic care in home care and health services. However, levels of public confidence in some public services remain high.

High profile failings in key public services have recently been uncovered, particularly amongst large private sector contractors

4. Strong partnerships – largely negative.

The voluntary sector is increasingly working as a sub-contractor to large private sector organisations and problems have developed.

5. Accessibility of contracts to the voluntary sector – largely negative.

Despite efforts to improve accessibility, and some lessons learnt from the Work Programme, there remains a systemic bias toward the private sector in contracting.

6. Decentralisation and personal control – no change.

Choice in public services has opened up under successive governments but is still limited and is working less well for disadvantaged groups.

7. Civil society input in service design – largely negative.

Despite Government commitments to co-design, consultation of the sector has become truncated, and the policy and campaigning voice of the sector has been under attack.

Levels of volunteering have risen

Social action: the indicators

1. Volunteering – largely positive.

Levels of volunteering have risen - but only back to pre- 2007-08 levels. More young people are volunteering. The increasing use of compulsory volunteering in welfare programmes is controversial.

2. Giving – largely negative.

There appears to have been a dramatic fall in giving, perhaps linked to the wider economy, with some rise in new forms of funding stimulated by the Government.

3. Community organisers – positive.

Numbers are increasing.

4. Adoption – positive.

The number of adoptions is one measure of a very personal kind of social action and is increasing.

There has been a dramatic fall in giving

A divided society

7. Ultimately, the Big Society initiative should lead to a better and more united society and social capital, commonly measured by levels of trust, would increase. Yet levels of trust have fallen between 2010-11 and 2012-13, the UK is still a very unequal society on international rankings and there are wide variations in wealth across the country.

8. Moreover, the 'Big Society Gap' between different groups and communities in relation to community empowerment, public services and social action shows no sign of closing.

Against each Big Society goal, there is a significant class divide

A new model for delivering public services is needed which draws on the respective strengths of all sectors, rather than seeing them as interchangeable

The Big Society Gap: the headlines

- Against each Big Society goal, there is a significant class divide.
- The Big Society is healthiest in affluent and rural communities and there is no sign of the gap closing.
- Disabled people have been badly affected by changes to public services.
- Ethnic minority people have lower levels of volunteering and reported levels of trust than the white population but are more positive about political engagement. Ethnic minority and religious groups are more likely to report discrimination by public services.
- Political engagement, volunteering and giving increases among older aged people, with the young becoming worryingly disengaged politically.

Beyond the Big Society

9. What shines through is the considerable power of civil society to connect with communities and respond to diverse needs, from bringing people together to run a local shop, to delivering trusted specialist services, from hospices to citizens' advice.

10. It is time for a radical review of the Big Society, in which the value of this activity is reflected, not just in community empowerment and social action, but also in the delivery and design of public services. This Audit recommends:

- **Development of a new model for delivering public services** which explicitly involves and draws on the respective strengths of voluntary and community organisations and wider civil society, as well as public service professionals and businesses, rather than seeing them as interchangeable. Voluntary and community led activity can add real social value, particularly where services are best delivered on a human scale and involve caring and resolving complex social problems. A long-standing bias toward the private sector and financial efficiencies of scale at the expense of social efficiencies should be corrected. The voluntary sector should also be given a more active role in the co-design of policies and services.
- **More investment in early action**, harnessing voluntary and community sector expertise in how to tackle complex social issues at their root.
- **Increased investment in building the social infrastructure of disadvantaged and urban communities**, particularly ensuring that valuable local voluntary and community organisations continue to thrive.
- **Steps to increase public sector understanding of the potential of the voluntary and community sector**, with more interchange and joint development between individuals working in the public and voluntary sectors.
- **Bringing the Big Society to business**, to ensure that all enterprises, whether for or not for profit, behave ethically in everything they do, especially when they contract with the public sector.

THE BIG SOCIETY AUDIT 2013

DECEMBER 2013

**CIVIL
EXCHANGE**
Strengthening Society's Connection to Government



Supported by

