

The Big Response:

Churches engaging
with the Big Society

Introduction

This resource explores what is beneath the Big Society; what opportunities it presents and what challenges it throws up.

It raises questions about the role of churches in delivering a Big Society, the particular implications churches need to consider and the capacity they will need to develop, before they carve themselves a niche in the Big Society.

10 years ago, when Faithworks first came into being, faith groups and churches were nowhere near as involved in public life as they are now.

There was widespread ignorance regarding the work of churches within their communities. Government, famously, did not 'do God' and the discourse about the role of faith in the public square was very limited. The playing field was not level – faith based organisations were poor relations – and those who put their heads above the parapet were often discriminated against.

During the last decade, the landscape has changed. The preceding government worked hard to bring faith groups to the tables of the regional and local authorities and to include them in the formation of local strategic planning processes. As a result, many churches have stepped forward and taken on responsibility for local projects in order to serve their community. Many more have been thinking and praying about how to respond to local needs and are getting ready.

So, with the growing recognition that churches have got a meaningful role to play in community, here we stand at the beginning of a new decade, with a new government and a new opportunity – called the Big Society. The question is: how should we, as churches, view this and what should we do?

Once funding has dried up, agencies often leave communities – but the people of God are called to stay to live out the hope of the Gospel week after week, year after year.

In Luke chapter 5, the account of Peter fishing all night and not catching any fish changes dramatically when Jesus tells him to let the nets down again. The story makes the point that the catch is so heavy that the nets begin to break and Peter needs his friends to help him retrieve the catch.

It's impossible to know what the Big Society might bring about. But if this is to be a time of real change, we, as churches, need not only to be ready to respond to the changes but we must have nets that do not break. Being part of a strong network and being networked together will undoubtedly make us all stronger and more able to take on the opportunities that lie before us.

The idea of the Big Society is to mend broken Britain. There are many views as to whether the UK has broken down or not. One thing, however, we can all agree on is that many of our communities have been broken apart. Families, high streets, pubs and post offices have all been affected. What we need to do is work together to find ways to join communities back up again and encourage people, particularly those who are excluded, to join in.

As the Big Society kicks into action, Faithworks calls churches to join the Faithworks Network. Not because Faithworks itself is important but because the act of joining together is critical to all of our successes. We promise to serve you with the resources you will need for the journey, to share best practice from other churches and Christian organisations and also to facilitate local partnerships. Faithworks commits to bring friends around you in order to help you serve your community.



What is the Big Society?

One of the foundations of Faithworks is the principle of Participatory Democracy. Democracy is so much more than the right to vote for a group of people to run society. It is the opportunity to get involved and make a contribution to community.

David Cameron's election campaign brought the idea of Participatory Democracy to the forefront of our consciousness. The message was loud and clear – our understanding of democracy needs to change; we get the kind of community we desire not by putting a cross on a piece of paper, but by understanding that we vote by rolling our sleeves up and getting on with it. Democracy is more about volunteering than voting. The coalition government calls this the Big Society.

While much has already been said by politicians about the Big Society, there is no one policy that sets out a framework for its delivery. Rather, the Big Society is an idea, a concept.

It's a concept rooted in a belief that society should not be characterised by a large government, delivering and controlling each community and its provisions, but rather by a society of people who are actively engaged in their neighbourhood, empowered to work collectively to increase the aspirations, the opportunities and the quality of the infrastructure and services operating within their communities. Under the coalition government, big state bureaucracies are destined to be dissolved in favour of the Big Society.

"It's time for something different, something bold – something that doesn't just pour money down the throat of wasteful, top-down government schemes. The Big Society is that 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." – David Cameron

In a speech in Liverpool on 19th July 2010, David Cameron launched the Big Society with an announcement that Liverpool, Cumbria, Windsor, Maidenhead, and the London Borough of Sutton would be the pilot areas for the Big Society and therefore would be part of "the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in government to the man and woman on the street."

The Aims of the Big Society Programme



Having read and listened to all the commentary that we can find, we have come up with the following as our best understanding of what the Big Society is about.

1 Cultural change

The Big Society is about changing the wind direction. It's about supporting people to feel free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities and thus stops people from being "passive recipients of state help". The Big Society is about developing individual responsibility for the common good.

2 Small government

The intention of the term 'Big Society' is to emphasise the difference between the size (and role) of government by contrast to that of society itself; big society, small government. The more we understand this concept the more the term itself is in danger of being a bit of a misnomer. The Big Society is actually more about small communities or maybe, a community of communities.

3 Decentralising power to local government

Part of the perceived legacy of the Labour government is the existence of a 'large' government which provides a comprehensive welfare state, overseeing the delivery

of public services utilising public money. The Big Society agenda is concerned with decentralising governance, moving away from central government and disseminating power down to local authorities and local communities.

Local decision making often generates the best decisions for local people. In the Big Society, local committees should have control over planning permission for affordable houses in dwindling villages because they know the housing needs and the urgency of the decision far better than the council will; local people should be supported to set up youth provision in their local areas so that young people are supported by the community not marginalised within it.

4 Civil society

Civil society is a society characterised by models and systems that enable local people to take more responsibility for their own flourishing and wellbeing. Civil Society is a society populated by agencies that can be set up by local people, like charities, social enterprises and co-operatives, enabling individuals to use their skills and abilities to support themselves and help each other to prosper.

5 Volunteering

At a time of economic difficulty, the Big Society supports a drive to increase volunteering, enabling and encouraging volunteer led organisations to take work out of the hands of the local government, thus reducing the cost of delivering public service and increasing skills and opportunities within local communities. The push to increase volunteering is not only directed at young people. The coalition government is looking to create social action on a mass level. Plans to achieve this include launching a national 'Big Society Day' and making regular community involvement a key element of key civil service staff development programmes. There is also a commitment to create a new generation of 5000 community organisers who will be trained to provide support for the creation of neighbourhood groups, especially in the most deprived areas.

6 Philanthropy

Many of our well known charities of today were started by philanthropists of a previous age – people who were concerned for the good of society and who invested their money in developing schools, homes or healthcare for those people for whom there was no social care, let alone state benefits. The Big Society intends to encourage philanthropic giving in today's society and to provide measures to make the process easier and more 'normal'. Funds from dormant bank accounts will also be used to establish a Big Society Bank, which will provide new finance for local groups.

Challenges for churches

As you read all of this I am sure you will be thinking to yourself – the Big Society is simply providing us with an opportunity to do more of what we already do – or if not – to do what we always thought we should do! That is: to provide building blocks for cohesion; to work to make communities safer; places where everyone thrives; in which parents are supported; children are stimulated; the elderly do not face isolation or young people exclusion.

But what about the pitfalls? What should churches be aware of?

A vision not a plan

It would be fair to say that, that which constitutes the biggest opportunity of the Big Society, also presents the biggest challenge. The Big Society is an idea, not a formulated plan. There is a vision but neither the detailed plan nor sufficient allocated resources needed, in order to change the idea into practical expression, are available. The opportunity this presents is significant. Churches and other community groups can help define the Big Society, they can offer innovative ideas, they can tell local government what the felt needs of the local area are, which interventions and community services are making a difference and which ones could be scaled up. But we should not expect to be given a blue print or indeed all the financial resources we think we might deserve to deliver the work.

Funding and Resourcing

Faithworks has witnessed over the past decade a great willingness on the part of churches to contribute to the wellbeing of their communities and to society at large. However the church is no cash cow. Under the coalition government, far from finding themselves cherished, charities are taking a hard hit from the first round of spending cuts.



The challenge that churches must now face is how to be ready to demonstrate their ability to replicate their work, to serve their community in new ways, whilst at the same time being realistic about their ability to take on new work without the promise of additional resource.

Who benefits?



A question the church must ask is: Who will benefit from the Big Society. It is very possible that the communities who will see the most benefit will be those communities that are already advantaged. Communities that already have many community services established, communities that have a higher percentage of people with the time, willingness and resource to put into setting up mutuals and community groups; communities which already have access to community buildings.

Yet another challenge for the church is to find ways of building whole communities in places where government strategy has already, and is likely to continue to fail. These are the communities where people are put off from engaging in community activity, for example, due to high crime or where it is difficult to get started because there is little holding the community together.

Freedom to critique

The Church does not exist to compete on price with government in the delivery of services; churches exist to be a prophetic voice, speaking out to protect the rights and wellbeing of those facing disadvantage; churches speak to the government not for the government. At this time, churches should be proud of their ability to deliver, but as increasing opportunities are presented, we must approach them with a dogged determination to preserve our Christian identity and not seek to win contracts at any cost. Any organisation that follows opportunities, and not its mission, will eventually lose its authenticity.

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On what basis do we engage?

Knowing our identity

It has been repeatedly demonstrated that Christians can work in the world, and with the world, without losing their identity; we can be distinctively Christian without refusing to serve those whose worldview or ethics are different to ours. In the footsteps of Jesus, who welcomed the economically unjust, the sexually illicit, people from across the border in Samaria, and treated who women as fellow humans, the Christ who would be found with the sections of society discriminated against and disrespected in 1st century Palestine, surely the church has a role in our society today. The Big Society gives us an opportunity to fulfil that role.

Once funding has dried up, agencies will often leave a community and projects will change – but the people of God are called to stay to live out the hope of the Gospel week after week, year after year – and to show by their presence that God has not abandoned those in need – indeed, that He never will.

Knowing our mission

What the church needs to say therefore in response to the Big Society stems out of who we are. We are called to serve the poor; we are called to ensure that disadvantaged, fragmented communities become resourced thriving places; we work for life and life in all its fullness, for all people in all communities.

We want to co-operate with the government in achieving this and to work alongside all those working to build whole communities, but we don't want to be co-opted by government – we are the Church. We are not the Conservative Party or the Liberal Democrats, Labour or any other party. We want a relationship of strength and we will serve as part of a Big Society because that's what we've been doing for hundreds of years as we run churches, schools, and projects with people in need. We will continue to do what we are doing; the Big Society simply gives us an opportunity to redouble our efforts.

The reason the Church should be involved in society is because Jesus called us to love God and to love your neighbour as you love yourself. Nothing else matters.

"The reason the Church should be involved in society is because Jesus called us to love God and to love your neighbour as you love yourself. Nothing else matters. Jesus said what you do to the least of these you do it to me; he said turn the other cheek, go the extra mile. Not because all of a sudden it's government policy.

Because what happens when it's not government policy? What happens when the government decides to centralise things more? What happens when the money isn't available? Where's the Church then? The Church doesn't do these things at the behest of the government. The Church does these things because it is in our DNA."
Steve Chalke

Enduringly:

The Big Society has been announced as a new idea, like it is some great new thing. This is not the reality. The Labour Government was also committed to localism and provided a wealth of opportunity for voluntary sector organisations and faith groups to get involved as service delivery agents.

And of course there has always been a Big Society formed of people, and groups, and churches and organisations who together work to ensure people are nurtured and protected and that their potential is fed by good services and released through empowering leadership. It happens all the time every day – through the individual who mows the neighbour's garden, or trims their hedge, by the parent who bakes cakes for the church fayre, by the nurse who works overtime without additional pay.

The Big Society provides new momentum, a new skin, but the message is the same; democracy only works when we all contribute, when we all get involved with our community, and all serve our neighbour.

Of course society can always become bigger and deeper and richer, the net needs to become stronger so that the most vulnerable don't slip through it unnoticed; but the net doesn't need creating from scratch, because we have already been building it.

What's important is that the church continues to serve, continues to embed itself in local communities, continues to foster wellbeing, and build the Big Society whether it is in fashion or out of fashion, government ideology or not. We need communities where everyone gets involved, not because we haven't got enough money to go around but because it is the only way of 'doing' community sensibly.



Additional information & resources

Who's who in the Big Society

Office of Civil Society

Nick Hurd MP (Con) – Minister for Civil Society

The Office of the Third Sector has now been replaced by the Office for Civil Society, taking responsibility for charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations in the Cabinet Office. The Cabinet Office supports the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, helping to ensure effective development, co-ordination and implementation of policy and operations across all government departments with the necessary support of the Civil Service. www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk

Communities and Local Government

Eric Pickles MP (Con) – Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

Communities and Local Government sets policy on supporting local government; communities and neighbourhoods; regeneration; housing; planning, building and the environment; and fire. It currently aims to give new powers to councils, communities, neighbours and individuals. www.communities.gov.uk

Lord Wei – Government Advisor on the Big Society

Nat Wei will be working alongside Cabinet Office and advise the Government on all aspects of taking forward the Big Society and driving its implementation across government. <http://natwei.wordpress.com>

Big Society Network

Led by Martin Rose and Paul Twivy

This independantly funded network aims to encourage people to take action in their local area, to take part in groups and to help community groups and social entrepreneurs to access the local powers that the government's Big Society legislative programme will create. www.thebigsociety.co.uk

Archbishop Rowan Williams

Addressing the subject *How should churches respond to the Big Society?* Archbishop Rowan Williams explored the opportunities and challenges for Christian organisations and churches engaging with the government's vision of the Big Society at a Charities Parlaiment event in June. Listen to or read his full speech at www.faithworks.info/rowanwilliams

Faithworks Charter

The Faithworks Charter is a set of 15 principles designed to help churches and Christian agencies deliver a standard of excellence in serving others and demonstrate to the Government and public that they can be taken seriously as providers of local services.

We will provide an inclusive service to our community by:

1. Serving and respecting all people regardless of their gender, marital status, race, ethnic origin, religion, age, sexual orientation or physical and mental capability.
2. Acknowledging the freedom of people of all faiths or none, both to hold and to express their beliefs and convictions respectfully and freely, within the limits of the UK law.
3. Never imposing our Christian faith or belief on others.
4. Developing partnerships with other churches, voluntary groups, statutory agencies and local government wherever appropriate in order to create an effective, integrated service for our clients avoiding unnecessary duplication of resources.
5. Providing and publicising regular consultation and reporting forums to client groups and the wider community regarding the effective development and delivery of our work and our responsiveness to their actual needs.

We will value all individuals in a way that is consistent with our distinctive Christian ethos by:

1. Creating an environment where clients, volunteers and employees are encouraged and enabled to realise their potential.
2. Assisting our clients, volunteers and employees to take responsibility for their own learning and development, both through formal and informal training opportunities and ongoing assessment.
3. Developing an organisational culture in which individuals learn from any mistakes made and where excellence and innovation are encouraged and rewarded.
4. Promoting the value of a balanced, holistic lifestyle as part of each individual's overall personal development.
5. Abiding by the requirements of employment law in the UK and implementing best employment practices and procedures designed to maintain our distinctive ethos and values.

We will develop a professional approach to management, practice and funding by:

1. Implementing a management structure, which fosters and encourages participation by staff at all levels in order to facilitate the fulfilment of the project's goals and visions.
2. Setting and reviewing measurable and timed outcomes annually, and regularly to evaluate and monitor our management structure and output, recognising the need for ongoing organisational flexibility, development and good stewardship of resources.
3. Doing all we can to ensure that we are not over-dependent on any one source of funding.
4. Implementing best practice procedures in terms of Health and Safety and Child Protection in order to protect our staff, volunteers and clients.
5. Handling our funding in a transparent and accountable way and to give relevant people from outside our organisation/project reasonable access to our accounts.

Take action

Sign the Faithworks 2010 Declaration

Call on the Prime Minister to recognise the contribution of churches and Christian Charities.

Become a member of Faithworks

Be part of a growing movement that is seeking radical and lasting change.

Affiliate your church or organisation to the Faithworks Network

Be part an influential movement of Christian initiatives that are serving their local communities unconditionally.

Sign the **Faithworks Declaration** calling on the Prime Minister to:

1. **Recognise** the important contribution that local churches and Christian charities have made historically, and can make in the coming years in providing services within local communities across the UK.
2. **Acknowledge** the indispensable role that faith in Christ plays in the motivation and effectiveness of welfare programmes developed by churches and Christian charities.
3. **Encourage** and promote further initiatives and deeper partnership underpinned by legislation, which assess services based on best value and contribution to the whole community, without discriminating against the faith that is vital to the success of the work of churches and faith based organisations.

Sign the
declaration

First Name

Last Name:

Email:

Please tick here to receive Faithworks e-mail newsletter

Join the Faithworks Network

FAITHWORKS MEMBER

Become a Member – FREE
Faithworks members are individuals motivated by their Christian faith to serve their local community and positively influence society as a whole.

First Name _____

Last Name: _____

Tel: _____

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Please tick here to receive Faithworks e-mail newsletter

FAITHWORKS AFFILIATE

Affiliate your Church or Project – £40 PER YEAR
Faithworks affiliates are projects, churches and organisations committed to professionalism, inclusion and valuing individuals as they serve their local communities. They sign up to the Faithworks Charter and receive free access to selected resources and discounts to training and events.

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*Faithworks, The Oasis Centre,
75 Westminster Bridge Road,
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