

Big Society, big opportunities and big cuts

The government's bottom-up Big Society vision offers some creative opportunities for advice organisations – if they are able to avoid the axe, say Toby Blume, Chief Executive of Urban Forum and Phil Jew, AdviceUK's Head of Policy & Campaigns

The Big Society is David Cameron's 'big idea' to fundamentally change the relationship between citizens, the voluntary and community sector and the state. It involves the radical transformation of public services – giving local people and not-for-profit organisations the opportunity to take over the running of public services – and giving more control to citizens over what happens in their area.

The government wants to see more people involved in local community action and has said its aim is to have neighbourhood groups in every community, and for every adult to be involved in a neighbourhood group. It's also about devolving power from central government to local government and giving local authorities more control over decision-making in their areas.

So there are essentially two strands to the Big Society programme:

1. Encouraging more community action
2. Reforming public services with citizens and not for profit groups playing a greater role

However, unlike the previous government's approach, the Big Society is not being presented as a 'fait accompli' with clearly defined proposals. Rather it should be seen as an idea of how things can be in the future, with the expectation that the details will be 'filled in' by others. This has led some to describe it as 'a bit vague', but it may simply be a new way of government developing policy, and it certainly offers the potential for a radically different way of doing things in the future.

Despite the lack of a detailed programme of activity, a number of specific initiatives have been announced. These include:

- reforming the planning system to give more control to neighbourhoods
- powers to communities to protect & take over facilities and services
- training 5,000 Community Organisers
- Big Society Day & National Citizen Service
- general Power of Competence to local authorities
- Big Society Bank & Communities First fund
- introducing a "Right to Data".

David Cameron announced four 'vanguard communities' that will test out a Big Society approach. Eden Valley (Cumbria), Liverpool, Sutton and Windsor & Maidenhead have been asked to develop proposals to take forward the Big Society in their local area, with the support of a 'barrier busting' team of civil servants who will help remove bureaucratic obstacles.

So how do independent advice organisations fit in?

First cut deepest

The pressure for immediate public spending cuts makes public service reform extremely urgent. However, establishing a 'new generation of 'community organisers' and building more social and community action will inevitably take much longer to achieve.

In the meantime, cuts will hit hard. And independent advice with discretionary funding is particularly vulnerable. Local authorities will have greater discretion over the use of funds. We are already seeing councils slashing voluntary sector

funding as they struggle to cut their expenditure. Ironically, this may mean less funding being available to support charities and social enterprises, at a time when they are being asked to play a far greater role. The first challenge of Big Society for advice organisations is avoiding the axe.

Opportunity knocks

Do that and there could be some real opportunities. The loose definition of Big Society creates a space for ideas and proposals. Those coming up with good ideas quickly may well benefit. Indeed, it is imperative that advice providers come up with ideas and don't wait to be told.

Public service improvement

Advice has a lot to offer the public service improvement agenda. As AdviceUK's BOLD project has demonstrated, advice agencies see daily the failures of public services and the effects of this on people's lives. Advice has the potential to contribute far more to public service improvement, efficiency and cost reduction. Good public services are co-produced: the service user is enabled to play an active part in the outputs and outcomes. Advice providers can facilitate co-production and co-design – assisting service users to have a greater say. AdviceUK is lobbying for this role to be recognised.

Social action

There is also a role for advice organisations in social action. The day of the advice agency that is truly embedded in its community and 'goes the extra mile' for individuals may have come. But it will depend on the advice organisation recognising and embracing a community development and organiser role. By articulating via casework, preventative and campaigning work the issues faced by individuals and communities, advice agencies can also play a vital role in social action and community organisation – but only if this work actively involves the community.

What will count here is learning from each other what works, measuring and demonstrating impact, working collaboratively and scaling it up. AdviceUK member Community Links provides a successful example of co-design and co-production of advice services. In response to community identification of complex application forms being a barrier to accessing welfare benefits in the ethnically and linguistically diverse borough of Newham, community volunteers were trained to assist local people. Incorrectly completed forms reduced from 70% to less than 1%, JobCentre Plus saved 230 working days and 60 volunteers gained paid employment.

If you have an example of how your organisation contributes demonstrably to community organisation, let us know.

Structures

The strong emphasis within Big Society co-operative and mutual approaches should spark new thinking about how advice services are structured. The majority of AdviceUK members are charities, with many organisations being registered as charities and companies limited by guarantee. We ought to be asking ourselves whether there is scope for altering structures in ways that could enable more community buy-in and involvement and also provide opportunities for new business models. Financial co-operatives like credit unions are examples of mutual ownership which resonate strongly with advice organisations.

It is abundantly clear that the voluntary sector and advice agencies are in for a hard time as public spending is squeezed at the same time as demand for services increases. Despite the dark clouds overhead, it is crucial that we do not miss out on what opportunities there are going forward. We must find new ways to work and proactively develop proposals of how advice agencies can contribute to the Big Society.

Talk to your local authority about your work and ideas. Your local authority may not be politically supportive of the Big Society initiative, but your ideas on how to reduce waste and cost, improve community involvement and access new funding pots will be of interest.

Further information

Both Urban Forum and NAVCA have Big Society web pages with briefings, analysis and links to key documents. See www.navca.org.uk/stratwork/big-society and www.urbanforum.org.uk/policy-pages/big-society

A toolkit to help advice agencies to successfully involve users and stakeholders in their activities, entitled *Involve, Engage, Empower*, has been developed by the Working Together for Advice project. Visit www.asauk.org.uk and go to the User and Stakeholder Involvement section of the Working Together for Advice page.

For more information on AdviceUK's BOLD project visit www.adviceuk.org.uk/bold