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“Big Society” and the Voluntary, Community & Faith Sector: A new opportunity?

With the outcome of the 2010 General Election now resolved and a Conservative / Liberal Democrat Coalition government in place, there are clear implications for the Voluntary, Community & Faith (VCF) sector. We are all painfully aware that significant funding cuts to public services are on the way, with an emergency budget to be announced on the 22nd June (and some immediate funding decisions already communicated). It is clear that the new government’s social policy, driven by David Cameron’s “Big Society” vision, will involve new approaches and the sector has been identified by the government as a key partner in delivering this vision. What we don’t know is how the sector will be resourced and empowered to meet this agenda. This policy briefing therefore focuses on setting out some of the key principles behind the Big Society vision, and the related messages from the Coalitions ‘programme for government’, in preparation for the changes in public service delivery that will emerge.

Key areas of policy include:

- Giving communities greater say over local planning systems and saving local services (e.g. post offices and pubs) and giving communities the right to bid to run local state-run services.
- A radical devolution of power and greater financial autonomy to local government and community groups. The creation of a new generation of trained community organisers to support the establishment of neighbourhood groups.
- Introducing measures to encourage giving and philanthropy.
- Encouraging volunteering/ involvement in social action, launching a national “Big Society Day” and making regular community involvement a key element of civil service staff appraisals.
- Piloting a new National Citizen Service, which aims to give 16 year olds the opportunity to develop skills to enable them to be active/ responsible citizens, to mix with people from different backgrounds, and to get involved in their communities.
- **Supporting mutuals, co-operatives, charities and social enterprises and giving them greater involvement in the running of public services. Funds from dormant bank accounts will be used to establish a Big Society Bank, which will provide new finance for neighbourhood groups, charities, social enterprises and other non-governmental bodies.**
- Increasing access to government-held data through a ‘new right to data’ for citizens, to ensure Government data is published. The police will be obliged to publish monthly crime statistics.
- Removing restrictions on local government finance to enable greater flexibility for local councils in determining budgets.

“We want 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.”

Government statement on the Big Society Programme, Cabinet Office website, May 2010.

Implications for the Sefton VCF Sector:

- **Public Service delivery** – it is clear that the new Government is looking at the whole issue of public service delivery and most importantly, *who* will be delivering those services in the future. For the VCF sector, there may be opportunities to work with communities to take on more local service delivery roles, but the role and perspectives of the private and independent sectors will have an impact. However, if communities are to be given more power and control, the Sector could be the mechanism to guide and nurture that involvement (if resourced properly). For Sefton, it will be case of wait and see what happens locally, but the potential for increased involvement clearly exists. Sefton VCF Sector organisations will benefit from keeping a close eye on the policy developments introduced through the Big Society agenda, to help inform and shape funding bids, commissioning responses and service planning processes.
- **Political reform** – political reform is a priority for the new government. The Coalition is keen to promote a ‘radical devolution of power’ with greater financial autonomy for local community groups. Does this mean greater access to, and control of, financial resources? Increasing democratic involvement remains a big agenda and the VCF Sector has a proven track record in engaging communities. As is common with this type of national policy area, the key issue will be how will it translate locally in Sefton. Watch this space
- **VCF Sector representation in decision-making** – with a stronger emphasis on decision-making at a local level, VCF representation in local decision-making bodies is more important than ever. In Sefton, we have recently been through a review of the Sefton Borough Partnership (the most senior decision-making **partnership** in Sefton) and its related sub-groups. This has taken place alongside significant consideration of how to establish a formal ‘area/ neighbourhood management’ structure in Sefton, to work alongside Area Committees in ensuring greater control at a more local level across the borough. The final details of this process are still being determined, but whatever the final outcome, VCF Sector representation will be essential.
- **“Big Society” day** – the government is proposing an annual Big Society day to celebrate the work of neighbourhood groups and stimulate further social action. There may be an opportunity in Sefton to utilise this day to further promote the work of the Sefton VCF Sector, (a strong and active sector consisting of over 1200 groups), to residents, public and private sector partners and potential funders and commissioners. This also has a strong link to promoting the many benefits of volunteering – a key feature of the Big Society agenda.

Further information:

Further information on the Big Society agenda/ coalition government policy developments can be found at: www.conservatives.com/news/news_stories/2010/03/plans_announced_to_help_build_a_big_society.aspx

www.urbanforum.org.uk/briefings/conservative-liberal-democrat-coalition-first-policy-agreements

In addition, 267 Chief Executives/ Leaders of third sector organisations have recently written to David Cameron to encourage the new government to work closely with the third sector to reform and strengthen public service delivery. Details can be found at: www.acevo.org.uk/Document.Doc?id=650.

This briefing has been produced by the Safer & Stronger Communities Programme Team

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