

## *The 'Big Society'*

### **What is it?**

The concept of a "Big Society" was part of David Cameron's election campaign, and is now a very real part of the Coalition Government. The Big Society agenda, alongside public sector cuts, is set to radically alter the voluntary and community sector. But what is it all about? This briefing aims to lay out the key policies of Big Society and translate how this might affect LGB&T groups in the North West. The Government has said, "We are all in this together", and while there will be definite changes in the coming years, there are real opportunities for LGB&T groups to get involved in their communities and influence services in their area.

The Big Society agenda is made up of three aims: community empowerment, encouraging philanthropy and volunteering, and reform of the public sector. Neighbourhood groups, charities, voluntary organisations and social enterprises will have more impact in their local areas, having the power to take over local services and receiving support to make positive changes to the lives of their community. The key policies are as follows:

- ❖ The Government will strengthen and support social enterprises to help deliver public service reforms
  - More social enterprises, charities and community groups will be responsible for delivering public services in their local area. Many LGB&T voluntary and community organisations already provide public services, such as sexual health testing or drug and alcohol support. More similar schemes would exist under the Big Society agenda
  - A Big Society Bank will be created using money from unclaimed bank accounts to fund social projects, charities, neighbourhood groups and enterprises across the country
  - People will be encouraged to set up social enterprises in their local area, and support will be offered to these new and existing organisations. Social enterprises are often locally based, and generate income to further their stated social mission. They are often not for profit, or low profit.

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# POLICY BRIEFING

- ❖ The Government will encourage the creation and development of neighbourhood groups in every area
  - Neighbourhood groups will be given new powers and rights. For example, groups will be able to bid to takeover community services like post offices or community centres. They will be able to access local information such as detailed street-by-street crime data
  - Neighbourhood grants will be provided for the UK's poorest areas
  - National Centres will be set up to train an "army" of community organisers. Each of these 5,000 organisers will work in their local area, independently of the Government, to support communities to come together and take positive action locally
  - The Government's ambition is that "every adult in the country becomes an active member of an active neighbourhood group". Big Society's emphasis is on people getting involved in their local area and working together to improve service provision and community cohesion
  
- ❖ The Government will encourage mass engagement in neighbourhood groups and social action projects
  - Regular community service will be made a key requirement of staff in the Civil Service. This is hoped to bring about a "culture change" in attitudes to volunteering, and may well become an element of other jobs outside of the Civil Service
  - An annual "Big Society Day" will be launched to celebrate the work of community groups and encourage more people to get involved in taking positive social action locally

The Big Society agenda places a large emphasis on neighbourhoods and geographic communities. This focus on localism is a potential concern for the LGB&T community, which is more often united by a shared experience of being a minority sexual orientation or gender identity, rather than being part of a city, town or village community. LGB&T groups may have to fight harder to make their voices heard. The opportunities provided by Big Society and localism, for example improving local LGB&T service provision, could potentially be restricted by public sector cuts. The last line of the Coalition Government's Agreement states, "the need for spending constraints overrides everything within this document".

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## ***What do you think?***

Discussions from an LGB&T Consultation Day hosted by the LGF on 21<sup>st</sup> August 2010 showed that many questions and concerns about the Big Society are shared across the sector. People were worried about how representative new localised groups would be, and how they would be held to account if they failed to cater for all elements of the community. LGB&T needs could be marginalised, or different needs within LGB&T ignored. Funding was also an issue, and it was felt that running costs, such as training volunteers, had not been fully considered in the plans.

However, several key opportunities were also identified. A Big Society culture could galvanise LGB&T groups to take action on issues that matter to them locally, as well as providing opportunities to develop groups. Neighbourhood working could help the integration of LGB&T issues into the local community, and normalise LGB&T people as productive members of society. People would be able to gain new skills through participation and by the same token, more skilled volunteers would be available to take part in groups.

## ***What can you do?***

Understanding the policies behind Big Society is the first step to preparing for the coming changes, but there are a few other things your LGB&T group can do as well:

- ❖ Identify what you already do that ties in with Big Society. Start collecting evidence, through surveys and interviews with service users and volunteers, that shows the positive impact of your group on the community
- ❖ Read up on funding. Make sure your group is aware of what funding cuts might happen, and where else you might apply for money, e.g. the neighbourhood grant fund and Community First grants
- ❖ Consider how you can involve your service users or group members more; find out about their skills and interests; how do they see the group developing?
- ❖ Think about becoming a community organiser. No specific details on training are available yet, but it's likely that a community organiser will be an important and influential role in representing a community's needs

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## **Further info**

Sign up to the Rainbow Partnership Network for other useful guides and weekly email updates for LGB&T organisations. Email [rainbow@lgf.org.uk](mailto:rainbow@lgf.org.uk) or call 0870 3 30 30 30 for more information

The Big Society Network: [www.thebigsociety.co.uk](http://www.thebigsociety.co.uk) – an interactive site and blog about the Big Society agenda

Voluntary Sector North West's online resource, collecting articles and opinions on the Big Society: <http://www.bigcivilsociety.blogspot.com/>

Check out the LGF's web-pages on supporting local activity for examples of making positive changes in areas where specific support is required, or where there is a need to take action for LGB&T people: [www.lgf.org.uk/supporting-local-activity](http://www.lgf.org.uk/supporting-local-activity)

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