The Big Society and the responsive state

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Introduction

Purpose and scope of the paper

This paper considers the challenges and opportunities for community development (CD) suggested by the emerging policy priorities of the new coalition government. It provides background information for deliberations on the future of CD by the Independent Expert Panel on Community Development. This is the second in a series of three panel papers. Paper one analysed some of the enduring features of CD, their causes and consequences. Paper three will explore ways in which CD might need to reconfigure itself in order to meet the challenges and rise to the opportunities outlined in this paper.

How the policy context is changing

Following the general election in May 2010, a coalition government was formed between the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. Reducing the level of public sector borrowing became an immediate political priority. An emergency budget heralded in-year public spending cuts of £6 billion and a Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) was scheduled for October 2010. While some of the CSR criteria to assess value for money focus on cost and economic value, other criteria assess whether the activity can be provided by a non-state provider, by citizens or by a local body, rather than by central government.

These questions reflect some of the key elements of the coalition government's commitment to build what it is calling the Big Society. At the time of the policy launch on 18 May 2010, five main commitments were set out in the *Building the Big Society* document (www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/407789/building-big-society.pdf). Government pledged to:

- give communities more powers

- encourage people to take an active role in their communities

- transfer power from central to local government

- support co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises

- publish government data.

www.cdf.org.uk

community development foundation

Since then dozens of new and wide-ranging policy initiatives have been launched under the Big Society banner. What can be gleaned from policy announcements, programme launches, ministerial speeches and media interviews forms the bedrock of this paper. However, this clearly represents a constantly shifting and evolving policy picture.

Recent speeches by David Cameron and Greg Clark (Minister for Decentralisation) have moved Big Society on from a label for disparate policy goals, to an emerging picture of three distinct but related policy strands:

- philanthropic action: what we can do for others

- public sector reform: or what the state can do for us

- community empowerment: or what we can do for ourselves.

This paper will not analyse the philanthropic action strand in depth.[1]

The first half of the paper considers policy changes in relation to community empowerment, or remaking relationships between citizens and their communities. The second half of the paper looks at policy changes in relation to public sector reform, or recasting relationships between citizens and the state. This is where we will discuss the devolution, decentralisation and localism agendas in detail, under the policy heading of building a 'responsive state' (as distinct from welfare states and top-down states). Both sections are structured in the same way. Each begins with a description of the new policy context, outlining the key initiatives the coalition government has announced so far. The paper then discusses the issues for CD arising from the changed context, such as the type and scale of support that community groups are likely to need.

Relationships between individual citizens and their communities

Policy goals and ambition

The coalition government aims to reshape the relationships between individual citizens and their communities by focusing on **what communities can do to help themselves**. This reflects the coalition's belief that too great a reliance on the state has taken away people's **personal responsibility** and led to community and social breakdown. Conversely, the government believes if people take responsibility for themselves and their communities, they will become active citizens who create active, sustainable communities. In recent speeches, both David Cameron and Greg Clark (Minister for Decentralisation) have referred to this strand of the Big Society as 'community empowerment'.

Several policy goals under the Big Society banner relate to social action and responsibility, including:

- generating social capital through **every citizen belonging to a neighbourhood group**

- making it easier for people to come together to improve their communities and help one another (**self help**)

- encouraging people to undertake voluntary action by presenting **social action as a social norm** and making them feel that others in their community are also participating.

Policy instruments relating to social action and responsibility

The following section briefly outlines what is known so far about each of the key policy instruments that relate to social action and responsibility.[2]

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[1] Treasury and Cabinet Office aim to provide new finance for social enterprises, charities and neighbourhood groups by incentivising more social investment and philanthropy and using funds from dormant bank accounts to establish a Big Society Bank. Policy instruments which change the routes to finance for community groups could have a massive impact on the future context for CD.

[2] The section takes the coalition document *Building the Big Society* (published 18 May 2010) as its starting point, and incorporates analysis of the Structural Reform Plans for the Cabinet Office (where OCS is based) and for Communities and Local Government (CLG). The section also draws on policy launches and announcements, ministerial speeches and media articles from June to August 2010.

Only those policy instruments that relate to remaking relationships between citizens and their communities are included here. Policies which aim to redefine public services or recast relationships between citizens and the state, such as those contained in the Localism Bill and Sustainable Communities Act, are dealt with in the second half of the paper.

- **Reduced bureaucratic burden on small voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations:** In order to create a better environment for small grassroots groups to flourish, a joint Big Society deregulation Taskforce has been launched by the Office for Civil Society (OCS) and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). This will build on previous research into burdens on small business to look at how to encourage more people to work together to improve their communities.

- **Seedcorn funding**: The **Community First neighbourhood grant fund** aims to provide start-up funding for community groups in disadvantaged parts of the country. It will fund activity in 100 deprived areas where social capital is low.

- **Promoting social enterprises, self help and cooperative action:** The government aims to make it easier for people to come together to improve their communities by supporting the creation and expansion of mutuals, cooperatives, charities and social enterprises. A crucial element of this is supporting these groups to have much greater involvement in the running of public services, and is discussed later in the paper.

- **National Citizen Service**: This pilot programme for 16-year-olds aims to help them to develop the skills needed to be active and responsible citizens, mix with people from different backgrounds and start getting involved in their communities. Activities will take place over a seven to eight week period in home-based and residential settings. They are expected to include an outdoor challenge, structured tasks involving visiting and helping the local community, skills development, and designing a social action task in consultation with local communities.

- **The Big Society Day:** This is a key policy initiative for encouraging people to volunteer and get to know each other. It will celebrate the work of neighbourhood groups and encourage more people to take part in social action in their community. It builds on the idea and experience of the 'Big Lunch' (www.thebiglunch.com) and has the potential each year to help create new groups and help people begin to identify issues at a wider community level.

- **Community Organisers:** Arguably the most important Big Society ambition in relation to the future context for CD is the intention to train a new generation of community organisers. This equates to a total of 5,000 people. Organisers' training will be paid for by the government and will take place in a mix of home-based settings and some kind of national organisers' centre. Typically Community Organisers will be required to find their own salaries.

It seems clear that the community organisers initiative will be important in helping people access the other Big Society strands and initiatives identified above. How community organisers operate will have implications for communities' experiences of accessing seedcorn funding, taking part in the national citizens' service or joining in Big Society Day events or projects. For this reason we focus on it in depth in the following section. Organising may be central to the other activities, but who will do the organising, who will they work with, and for what purpose? Such questions connect community organisers to long-standing issues in CD.

Community organising and the Citizen Organising Foundation

Community organising as a movement and a way of working has been around in the UK since 1990. It has a very particular approach, promoted and trained by the Citizen Organising Foundation (COF), which is all about understanding and negotiating with power. Although published details on the coalition government ambitions to

train a new generation of community organisers are still unclear, it seems likely that they will depart from the COF model for community organising in some very fundamental ways.

Community organising is inspired by Saul Alinsky's Rules for Radicals (published in 1971). As Marjorie Mayo reflects in an article for the *Community Development Journal*: 'Here was an organiser who started from the reality that community development was also characterized by conflicts of interest, openly exploring ways of engaging with conflict and using conflict tactics effectively' (Mayo, 2004). 'Broad-based community organising', of the kind inspired by Alinsky, is about creating a powerful alliance of institutions. Whereas 'community action' often refers to campaigning by single issue groups (such as claimants unions or squatter groups), 'community organising' brings the members of different groups together in a broader coalition, in order to influence more powerfully and more sustainably, albeit on a single issue at a time. London Citizens is a successful and high profile alliance supported by the Citizen Organising Foundation. They are best known for their 'Living Wage' campaign, but have had similar successes on the treatment of asylum seekers and other issues.

Within community organising, member organisations target power holders on their particular issue, relating to Alinsky's thirteenth rule of 'Pick a target, freeze it, personalise it, and polarise it' (Alinsky, 1971). This tactic is designed to stop the blame being shifted, or responsibility evaded. It has nevertheless been contentious, as Marjorie Mayo again explains: 'Personalizing a target might have the benefit of sharpening a campaign's focus, but at the potential cost of scapegoating particular individuals. This might also depoliticise the underlying issues rather than unravelling the structural causes of social problems' (Mayo, 2004).

Organising in the UK focuses its efforts on work with membership institutions – mainly the different churches and trade unions. It does not support the growth or development of community groups or directly provide services or support to the poor. But this is a matter of

choice, not principle. Groups, people and governments that do seek to nurture community groups could choose to train them along community organising lines. While community organising clearly has huge political interest and support as a result of achievements with the Living Wage campaign, what the coalition government is proposing within the role of community organisers seems quite different.

Community organisers in the Big Society context

The community organisers proposed by the coalition government are intended to agitate for change in the sense of helping groups to take advantage of their new rights in the Localism Bill (discussed later in the paper). However other intended aspects of their roles dilute the broad-based organising and power leverage approach exemplified by COF and the community organising movement. Community organisers will nudge people to participate in their communities by, for example, helping to promote the Big Society Day, facilitating social action to solve issues, supporting neighbourhood groups to form, and supporting communities and groups to develop neighbourhood plans.

These expectations on community organisers in the Big Society context will be instantly recognisable to those who currently use CD approaches in their worker or activist roles.

Helping people to form groups, assess needs (through parish plans, village appraisals, community consultations, planning for real, etc.), plan action, secure funding and monitor progress are absolutely key roles in current CD practice. Techniques, toolkits and frameworks exist to support this kind of practice. There is also a large body of evidence (including evaluations, case studies and reflective accounts) that show how outcomes differ when activities use a CD approach. The existing National Occupational Standards (NOS) for CD and campaigning map well against the role of community organiser as currently understood in the context of the Big Society, and apply to both paid and unpaid enabling roles within communities. Indeed if community organiser training is accredited and

standards-based, this could represent a great opportunity to provide recognised skills training during a recession.

Entrepreneurial intermediaries

A significant gap opens up between current CD approaches and the new policy context in relation to one fundamental role envisaged for community organisers under the Big Society banner. Neighbourhood groups will be expected to develop (additional or alternative) public services and bid to provide them (as proposed in the Localism Bill which is discussed later in the paper). Community organisers – and others – will be expected to support them to do so. The policy context requires intermediaries (currently in a variety of locations and guises) to refocus their attention on developing new community groups that are willing and able to develop and deliver public services. The second half of this panel paper explores some of the very specific and specialised roles that intermediaries will need to fulfil if they are to grow self-help groups (by bridging groups and state, getting technical expertise to groups at key points and being skilled and flexible in the resourcing of groups). This is clearly not currently the focus of most people employing CD approaches in their work or activism.

Community organisers: recognising volunteers and activists

Government have stated that community organisers' wages will not be funded by the state. This leaves them applying their necessary entrepreneurial skills to raising their own salaries (detracting from their supporting role to neighbourhood groups), or undertaking the role in a voluntary capacity. On the one hand, accrediting training or simply assigning someone as a community organiser could provide an opportunity to re-emphasise the contribution of CD approaches used in a voluntary capacity. It could be a way of recognising activists who currently lack status in relation to paid professionals.

On the other hand, there are particular challenges that arise from a policy instrument which

essentially depends on people devoting free time and goodwill to some of the most intractable social problems. How will multiple, existing community activists, leaders, volunteers and representatives relate to the new, single organiser in each locality? What might be the consequences of accrediting, endorsing or elevating one kind of volunteer above other types? Might this just recreate the 'professional' versus 'lived experience' divides that it seeks to overcome? If community organisers prove successful will power become consolidated as neighbourhood groups attract funding? Will representative local democracy suffer and councillors lose out? If community organisers fail to motivate citizens (because of lack of skill, lack of time, highly transient populations, previous negative experiences or other reasons) what responsibility does government have for the Big Society? What should communities expect to happen in such circumstances? What processes do communities have to replace their organisers, if necessary, whether due to incompetence, divisiveness, burn-out or other factors?

Nudging action, not resourcing or requiring it

The government argues its ambition to nudge community action without relating it to resourcing has the advantage of freeing communities, groups and organisers from reliance upon central resources and control. While community groups, CD workers and activists alike welcome the notion of being led by communities on issues, this also poses challenges. Any new found 'freedom' to respond to community needs may not deliver much social change without resourcing and support for grassroots community activity. Without central support, what are the levers that kick start voluntary action? How do you grow the scale of community action? What small-scale, low-commitment activities act as stepping stones to increased participation? What activities and events do not lead to further involvement? How will rigorous thinking, testing and learning about growing the scale of community action emerge from individual and independent experiments? Do such issues suggest a need for intermediaries and networks capable of monitoring, deliberating, disseminating learning, sharing experience, and

generally trying to make sense of the different ideas and outcomes in the Big Society?

While the policy ambitions for the Big Society Day and the National Citizen Service do specifically refer to cohesion outcomes, none of the policy material to emerge thus far addresses the extent to which community organiser support should focus on bringing people from different backgrounds together or on supporting vulnerable citizens and groups to get involved. This perhaps is too reminiscent of the top-down targets the provisions of the Localism and Decentralisation Bill are intended to sweep away (discussed later in this paper). Yet we know from CD experience that bringing people from different backgrounds together (in intergenerational work, work with migrants and receiving communities, conflict mediation, etc.) takes intensive preparation with the different individual groups if it is to be successful. Indeed it can exacerbate tensions if preparatory work is not undertaken.

Furthermore, VCS organisations have generally had a much stronger reputation than the public sector for facilitating the access and inclusion of marginalised and underserved groups. Under the previous Labour government their work was often commissioned and resourced by statutory agencies, exactly because their statutory duties and targets required them to address equality issues. Many statutory organisations which had previously never engaged with communities did so because they were being held to account for the ways in which they engaged with and involved local people in decision making. The coalition policy priority to free statutory authorities from targets will free them to focus on communities' needs, but it will not guarantee they will do so.

Finally, we know from years of CD experience that there is no such thing as a single community view. Views within communities differ, overlap, diverge and conflict. Dealing with the contradictory results of engagement is even more challenging than getting people engaged in the first place. What will happen to issues raised by minorities, which can be just as important as issues raised by the majority? What should happen? 'Equalities' issues often provoke the strongest polarisation of community views, whether about the provision of traveller sites, the location of affordable housing or youth facilities, or relationships between receiving communities and migrants. Some of the most innovative and pioneering approaches to local development and service provision could emerge from the concerns of minority groups in communities if they are supported appropriately. On the other hand, who is accountable if a volunteer or activist fails to address community issues? How do responsibility and empowerment overlap and differ?

This section of the panel paper has considered how the post-election policy context is creating new expectations and uncertainties regarding relations between citizens and their communities. A new generation of community organisers, assisted by freshly mobilised community activists and young people doing national community service, are expected to reinvigorate neighbourhoods and transform local services. Social entrepreneurs will be crucial to the success of these endeavours. However, there are uncertainties over how this will be resourced, monitored and supported. There are also issues concerning the abilities of people to assume the roles expected of them, and whether they will operate in ways that improve or undermine cohesion. Another important aspect to the changing policy context is to develop a responsive state, which we will discuss in the following section.

Relationships between citizens and the state

Policy goals and ambition

The coalition government aims to reshape the relationships between citizens and the state by creating a **responsive state** which is accountable to the **responsible citizens** envisaged in the previous section. While the Conservative governments of the 1980s centralised power and decision making, Labour devolved certain powers to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the English regions. Labour also aspired to double devolution, where power passes to local bodies

and to citizens. **Decentralising ambitions** have accelerated under the coalition but they want to do this the other way round – **the individual citizen is the first point of call, then communities, then local authorities**. The government wants to 'transform Britain by giving power away'.

David Cameron and Nick Clegg set out their vision for 'giving power away' in an article in *The Telegraph*:

> *'The difference is in what we're asking departments to do – not to control things from the centre but to put in place structures that will allow people and communities to take power and control for themselves. In place of the old tools of bureaucratic accountability – top-down regulation and targets – are the new tools of democratic, bottom-up accountability – individual choice, competition, direct elections and transparency.'*
> (The Telegraph, 12 July 2010)

To illustrate bottom-up accountability in action, they use an example from education. They argue that from now on, schools will need to impress parents, not the Department for Education. Parents will be empowered to demand better service. However another policy example from education suggests that accountability will be a rather more complicated issue to unravel. The 'Free Schools' programme makes founding parents responsible for providing better services, once they have impressed the Department for Education that their proposal is valid. Accountability issues will be discussed in detail below in relation to potential roles for intermediaries, suppliers and enablers.

Policy instruments relating to devolving power to citizens

The following section briefly outlines what is known so far about each of the key policy instruments which aim to recast relationships between citizens and the state. Most of the provisions will be contained in the Localism and Decentralisation Bill or are already enshrined in the Sustainable Communities Act.

- **The general power of competence:** The government is committed to having a power that is as wide as possible, so that local authorities can act in the interest of their local communities. However, this is a complex policy area and it remains to be seen how this will work alongside the Well Being Power which permits councils to undertake any activity that improves or promotes the economic, social or environmental wellbeing of their area unless explicitly prohibited elsewhere in legislation.

- **The power for citizens to instigate local referendums on any local issue:** It remains to be seen how this will differ from the current situation where a referendum is triggered if 5 percent of the local residents sign up to a petition.

- **The power to veto council tax increases above a threshold agreed by Parliament** which will automatically trigger a referendum of all registered voters in the area. This will be a move away from the central government caps introduced by Labour and aims to give greater power to residents.

- **Radical reform of the planning system:** This aims to give citizens much greater ability to determine the shape of the places in which they live through a process of 'collaborative democracy' with local authorities. It is based on the principles set out in the Conservative Party green paper, *Open Source Planning* (www.conservatives.com/~/media/Files/Green%20Papers/planning-green-paper.ashx) and will be brought in through the Localism Bill. It will bring in a new 'duty to cooperate' for local authorities and other statutory agencies whose work impacts on planning (for example the Environment Agency). It will remove central and regional planning powers and will bring in bottom-up mechanisms such as neighbourhood plans and community land trusts.

- **Abolition of inspection regimes and mechanisms** (such as the Comprehensive Area Assessments [CAA] and the Place Survey): Central government will identify areas where it needs to retain an oversight

role, set out initial expectations for local authorities regarding data transparency, and design and implement a new approach with fewer reporting burdens and greater transparency. They aim to make councils more accountable to residents rather than ministers in Whitehall as shown by policies like the 'right to data'. It is unclear what role national indicators will play in future but councils are likely to have more freedom to decide how they will be accountable to their residents and what mechanisms they want to use.

- **Removing regional and national layers of administration:** The government has abolished government offices for the regions. A wider review of effectiveness of infrastructure will take place and is likely to result in further rationalisation, merging and abolition of administrative bodies. For example Regional Development Agencies have been abolished and will be replaced with joint council and business-led partnerships called Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs).

- **Make it easier for sector organisations to work with the state:** The government aims to increase trust in the public commissioning process, while creating a more level playing field for the voluntary sector. It plans to instigate longer-term contracts based on outcomes rather than micromanaging process conditions to enable not-for-dividend organisations to bid on the basis of price not cost, and so be free to earn a return on investment if they are helping save taxpayers money. It will also encourage the participation of smaller organisations that can help tackle the toughest social problems. As part of the review into infrastructure, OCS will also consult on the effectiveness of infrastructure support to frontline organisations.

- **The right to bid to take over or save local services:** Community groups can already do this but the government is exploring how they can help level the playing field so that the VCS can compete more effectively when bidding to take over local

state-run services and save local facilities threatened with closure.

- **Support the creation of social enterprises, mutuals and cooperatives:** The government aims to support self-help groups and social enterprises to have greater involvement in delivering public services. It will give public sector workers a new right to form employee-owned cooperatives.

The following policy instruments are being carried forward from the New Labour period in government:

- **Sustainable Communities Act:** The Act sets up a 'double devolution' process so that local people can drive central government action to promote sustainable communities. It specifies that local authorities cannot make suggestions to central government without involving 'local people'. Councils must set up (or recognise if they already exist) 'panels of representatives of local people'. Such panels must include people from usually under-represented groups: ethnic minorities, young people, older people, tenants, etc.

  In addition government must publish local spending reports that will provide a breakdown by local area of all public spending (i.e. central and local). This 'opening of the books' has never been done before and is likely to generate much debate as central agencies and quangos have to show how their money is spent locally. Local authorities can use these spending reports to then argue for the transfer of specific monies and their related functions from central to local control. Once under local control these new resources and powers could be used to promote local shops, local jobs, local services like Post Offices, local food, etc.

- **Total Place:** Total Place aims to create joined up public services which are designed around citizens. Any locality can undertake Total Place style reforms. Total Place emphasises preventative work and often focuses on redesigning services which cut across traditional institutional barriers. Although the Total Place approach emerged under the previous Labour government, the

coalition government has signalled that place-based budgets and joined up local services, of the sort which Total Place advocated, are the 'future' of local government.

Overall, this raft of measures is intended to free up the local tier of government, devolve powers to it, make it more responsive to its communities, and even devolve the running of services to communities themselves. This new context creates many opportunities for CD to play a role in two key respects. The first was covered in the preceding section: enabling communities to take up these opportunities in an informed way, appreciative of the possibilities, but also the risks. The second, discussed below, is the role CD can play in helping those in power become more responsive to communities.

Intermediary and enabling roles in the context of decentralisation and 'giving power away'

According to information emerging so far on community organisers in the context of the Big Society, a key part of their role is help community groups and state come together. At least part of their role consists of promoting understanding and take-up of the new rights of citizens and communities that will be enshrined in the Localism and Decentralisation Bill. Their success in this will depend on several factors outlined in the previous section of this paper (entrepreneurship, voluntarism, skills in group building) and on the response by the local state to the groups they are working with. How able are they to draw on or signpost targeted technical support for the groups they are working with? How effectively has the part of the state they're engaging with prepared itself to receive demands for new ways of working from multiple and diverse community groups?

Technical support by enablers and intermediaries

Neighbourhood groups taking up their new rights under the Localism agenda will require technical support on some or all of the following:

- calling local referendums

- owning and managing assets and services

- doing neighbourhood plans and influencing planning decisions

- establishing and running community land trusts

- becoming financially self-sustaining.

For example, the process of asset transfer and management can itself give rise to technical challenges such as risk assessment, legal, valuation and financial advice. A community group wishing to take over ownership of land could face with issues of contamination and soil chemistry, and subsequently public liability insurance. Self-help groups included in a recent CDF study needed technical knowledge of legal representation, child protection, planning applications and building regulations (Vanderhoven and Archer, 2010). Clearly such technical knowledge does not all exist in one place, and some of it is best sourced from the private sector or from other VCS organisations. However, we do know that much of what groups need can be found in the staff expertise of public services, local government, health services and housing associations (Vanderhoven and Archer, 2010).

What is the best platform for matching the needs of groups with the skills and knowledge of public service officers? Given the government's commitment to turn the civil service into a 'civic service' we have an opportunity to get specialist skills out of public services and – voluntarily – into self-help groups. Alternatively, do 'barrier-busting teams', of the kind Greg Clark has established in his department, need to be established across local government too? Would they work?

> 'That is why we need to turn central government upside down and inside-out. Instead of the civil service only being focused upwards on providing advice to Ministers – and inwards on its own priorities – we must drive the focus downwards and outwards to put those resources at the service of communities nationwide. In my own department, I am establishing a "barrier-busting" team whose sole purpose will be to help community groups get the backing they need when they encounter bureaucratic obstacles to local objectives.' (Greg Clark, speech, 22 July 2010)

Finally, can mainstream frontline workers' roles be restyled enough to routinely serve community and self-help groups needs in these ways? Would specialist CD or community engagement advisers need to train and support 'technical' workers for their new 'frontline' roles? How varied might the demands of communities be? Will it be possible to translate these into more standardised packages of service response?

Self help, co-production, and public service reform

In CDF's recent study of self-help groups, important roles for intermediaries were identified in brokering technical support (as described above) and in 'reconciling lived and professional experiences of what needs to be done' (Vanderhoven and Archer, 2010). Key activities for such intermediaries include:

- identifying self-help groups that are providing important benefits

- looking at their distinctive practices (that are in contrast to the state and how they complement public services)

- identifying the support and resource needs of the group

- mediating between the state and the group to ensure optimum leasing/funding/resourcing arrangements are reached.

In essence the role entails advocating for self-help practices, giving the groups credibility in the eyes of public service providers and ensuring that the groups are supported and resourced in a way that enables them to apply their practices.

While this bridge to public services seems essential in supporting self help, it may not be necessary in other forms of co-production which blur the traditional distinctions between the users and officials of public services, employers and employees. In *Help from Within* (2009) Archer compares self help and co-production. The examples of co-production he cites portray unequal partnerships. Co-producers are often not asked to make decisions, but just to do frontline work (see Philadephia hospital example). Do we want communities in charge of helping themselves, or just co-delivering services? Self help seems a bolder and more persuasive approach, but one which will require a bigger change in the way public service business is done, and better facilitation of such change.

Accountability and responsibility

These legislative changes are being undertaken in the interests of devolved power and improved accountability. As the education example from the beginning of this section demonstrates, however, lines of accountability and responsibility can run in different directions in relation to the different proposed provisions of the Localism and Decentralisation Bill.

There seems to be an interesting dynamic at play where some policy instruments are about 'devolving power' and giving 'freedoms' to local authorities while others characterise all government – including local government – as a kind of tyranny to be swept away. This sets up potential tensions between community organisers and local councillors, for example, in relation to voice and representativeness, and between local authorities and communities in relation to planning. In a *Guardian* article, Peter Hetherington (2010) argues that government's restructuring in the NHS will undermine the policy push to place-based budgeting. Total Place enthusiasts explain that where Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) pool their budgets with local authorities, this opens up genuinely innovative possibilities for investing in preventative work (for example on adult social care). This can lead to improved care and quality of life and accrues substantial savings to acute health budgets. The replacement of PCTs with direct GP commissioning undermines any such innovations by replacing one arm of the local state with private sector suppliers. Not only does this remove any local incentive or democratic imperative to work in a better, preventative way, but it also removes the mechanism for doing so if you choose.

Other tensions could emerge around aspirations to commission community groups as long-term providers of public services and to pay by results (outcomes) instead of outputs. Citizens might actually lose both accountability and transparency

if service delivery contracts become subject to commercial confidentiality. Furthermore if poor decisions are made by commissioned neighbourhood or self-help groups, for example in providing advice to victims of domestic violence, who shoulders responsibility? How can we expect volunteers to meet certain standards when they are giving their time for free? If we do ask for certain standards to be met, will we scare volunteers off? As community groups fulfil more and more public services, will we push for more and more consistency and quality assurance, and in the process will we mainstream them, replicating the state services they replaced?

At present much government thinking about local accountability is centred on giving citizens better access to transparent data (the Right to Know), and powers over public bodies (the Right of Challenge), such as vetoing council tax rises. There is a gap in thinking about how other forms of engagement with the public will be facilitated. This is especially true for accountabilities for failures. This need not be a Right to Compensation (or similar), but rather accountability for learning from failures, and ensuring systems operate better in the future. Whose responsibility will this be?

The scale of the challenge in relation to the Big Society makes this crucial to get right. But lessons from small scale pilots, initiatives and pathfinders suggest that this is not easy and does not happen automatically. Although customer insight and culture change are key pillars of Total Place, for example, many pilots seem to have struggled to realise those ambitions. The customer insight work which has been done so far through Total Place has often failed to incorporate good practice from the fields of CD and community engagement. Much customer insight work does not seem to involve the community in the actual re-design of services. Much of the culture change work in areas undertaking Total Place style reforms has been based on a change model which relies on leadership, and the VCS seems to have had a diminished role. A CD perspective has a lot to contribute in terms of designing public services around communities' needs. What can we learn from initiatives like Total Place or Neighbourhood Management that are not built upon existing engagement mechanisms or community development channels? If this tendency to fragmentary engagement persists, there are risks that under the Big Society banner services will not become more responsive, citizens and community groups will not become any more empowered, and the institutional cultures of public agencies will continue to act as barriers to improvement.

Accountability will depend on local people understanding how systems work in more detail. It will also depend on the local and national state mediating new opportunities and freedoms fairly so that power does not become consolidated or minority disadvantage reinforced, for example through planning processes or the resourcing of particular groups as preferred providers. A key challenge for CD, whether used by paid workers or volunteers and activists, will be to build equality and inclusion into Big Society opportunities so new people get involved, empowered and 'responsible'.

In this section we have considered the second aspect to the changing policy context for CD, which is a desire by the coalition government to build a more responsive state. What are the most effective ways for the local state to prepare itself to receive demands for new ways of working from community groups? What processes should it put in place to deal with the results of engagement in a climate of reduced red tape? How can it mediate conflicting community views so as to avoid impasse while ensuring democratic accountability in the process? What is the role for CD, or for other intermediaries and enablers in supporting authorities to mediate in this way?

Summing up

The coalition government is introducing some far-reaching reforms that are rapidly altering the policy context for communities and for CD in England. These relate to ideas to create a Big Society and a responsive state. However in analysing the shifting context, we see that enduring issues for CD are recast rather than replaced.

Questions which will be given fresh impetus over the coming years include:

- What constitutes community?
- Who represents communities?
- How far can self help and empowerment emancipate people from social and economic disadvantage?

What's more, the new policy context will be implemented in communities experiencing or recently emerging from economic recession and public spending cuts.

Our discussion has highlighted issues that present opportunities for CD, as well as issues that challenge CD.

Opportunities for CD include:

- engaging with the community organiser model to ensure the required skills and tools for the role are recognised and incorporated
- enabling people to become active citizens
- providing intermediary services to neighbourhood and self-help groups
- monitoring, evaluating, deliberating and disseminating experience and key lessons
- training public authorities and private service contractors to understand community dynamics and processes, and to be responsive
- exploring new forms of accountability under the new arrangements, which will be characterised by community-related activity of diverse types, purpose, scale, sector and complex webs of responsibility (social action in a Big Society context looks likely to involve hybrids of community groups, social entrepreneurs, public services and private contractors overseen by citizens, as well as local governments).

Challenges for CD include:

- maintaining sufficient mass to support growth in activism and needs, especially in the context of public cuts

- ensuring active citizens are not solely providing services, but are also able to make demands upon authority and power
- making sure the changing nature of community action does not escape CD approaches, skills and tools.

The issues outlined in this paper are intended to stimulate discussion about the future of CD among members of the Independent Expert Panel on Community Development. Ways in which CD might need to reconfigure itself to meet such challenges and rise to such opportunities will be considered in the third and final panel paper.

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