

Tomorrow's People on The Big Society



WHAT IS THE POLICY?

The Big Society was a key plank of the Conservatives' election campaign manifesto and became official policy very soon after the Coalition Government was established. At the heart of the policy is the ambition to "create a climate that empowers local people and communities, building a big society that will "take power away from politicians and give it to people". It is made up of five strands:

- Giving communities more powers.
- Encouraging people to take an active role in their communities.
- Transferring power from central to local government.
- Supporting co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises.
- Publishing government data.

It includes individual initiatives such as the Big Society Bank and the National Citizen Service. But the main issue that affects organisations such as Tomorrow's People is the focus that the Government has put on seeing that charities, social enterprises, neighbourhood projects and other non-governmental bodies have a "greater involvement" in running public services. Further details on specific proposals are expected in due course.

Some facts and figures

- Five pilot projects in Liverpool, Eden Valley, London Borough of Sutton, Cumbria, and Windsor and Maidenhead
- Launched on 18 May
- Relunched in Liverpool on 19 July
- Responsibility of every department of Government
- Will give local communities the right to take up State-run services
- Will return decision-making powers over housing and planning to local councils
- Will give public sector employees the right to set up employee-owned cooperatives

TOMORROW'S PEOPLE THINKING ON BIG SOCIETY

Tomorrow's People welcomes the broad vision outlined by the Prime Minister. The charity was founded in 1984 during a time of economic turmoil, high unemployment and social unrest. The core philosophy was that Government could not be expected to tackle every issue and that it was incumbent on business, communities and government to work together to make society a better place. This appears to be the philosophy of the Big Society.

If that spirit becomes diffused among all the various organisations that help deliver community services it will increase the extent to which the various parties can work together towards the Government's goals. We particularly applaud the fact that partnership will be a central part of the policy as that it is likely to foster community cohesion. We also support the idea of asking communities what they want from public services. We welcome the intention to replace the top-down approach that has characterised public service planning in the past with engagement with the people who rely on the services.

OUR CONCERNS

We are worried about a growing public suspicion that the Big Society is just about people giving their time for free. We believe strongly that the Big Society should not be about replacing the state with community activities. We are worried that the emphasis put on volunteering by the Government could be misinterpreted. While we accept that the details have not yet been fleshed out we are concerned that the current focus is not on the activities that would best lead to improvements in public services nor on greater partnership between communities, organisations such as Tomorrow's People, businesses and governments. Organisations such as ourselves must act as a supplement to, rather than a substitute for the state.

WHAT WE WANT FROM GOVERNMENT

There should be a clearer statement from Government that the Big Society does not seek to replace core public services with locally organised activities, such as volunteers running local libraries. The focus should be on partnership between communities, business and government to make service delivery more effective and better targeted.

Tomorrow's People has long experience of identifying problems on the ground in local areas and putting together partnerships with other organisations and community leaders to deliver solutions. One example is our involvement with Allia, the social profit society, whose charitable bond mechanism enables people and businesses in local communities to invest in a financial bond, to the benefit of voluntary and community organisations focused on unemployment and regeneration. In order to succeed the Big Society has to ensure that it draws in people and organisations that have the

relevant expertise rather than simply relying on volunteers donating their time. This is one reason why our young people's community challenges under our Working It Out Initiative, which helps young adults undertake local projects that benefit the community and improve the environment, have been successful. For its part Tomorrow's People wants to be part of Big Society activities that help people find work.

A central philosophy behind the work that Tomorrow's People does is showing respect for people with severe disadvantages. This should be a central element of the Big Society so that it ensures that organisations are seen to provide a hand up for people rather than a handout. It is essential that Big Society is structured in a way that the three sectors – community, business and government – work together to identify problems, construct the solutions and find the resources.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

Tomorrow's People working with the long-term unemployed

www.tomorrows-people.co.uk

Cabinet Office policy document

www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/407789/building-big-society.pdf

Allia, the social profit society

www.allia.org.uk