Can You Tell What It Is Yet? Public Attitudes Towards 'the Big Society'

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'The big society' was a central theme in the Conservative's 2010 general election campaign. Opinion polls at the time of the election suggested that 'the big society' had little resonance with the public. Nevertheless, 'the big society' has been the subject of a number of prominent re-launches since the election. It appeared to underpin the Coalition government's policies in a range of areas and the Prime Minister invested considerable personal capital in it. This article examines public attitudes towards 'the big society'. Drawing on public opinion data, it focuses on public recognition and understanding of 'the big society' and more broadly on whether the government's approach to rolling back state provision has prompted an increased public appetite for involvement in the delivery of services.

Introduction

'The big society' was a central theme in the Conservative campaign for the 2010 general election, and has been the subject of a number of high-profile re-launches since the election. It was, to some extent, a response to the idea that British society was somehow broken, which was at the heart of a series of reports produced by the Centre for Social Justice in the run up to the election. These reports, which included *Breakdown Britain* and *Breakthrough Britain,* combined traditional Conservative concerns such as family breakdown and welfare dependency with a broader understanding of the social impact of issues such as addiction and the rise in personal debt (Bochel, 2011; McKay and Rowlingson, 2011). As Kisby has observed, 'the big society' also draws heavily on Conservative ideas about 'active citizenship' developed in the 1980s. Under the influence of Ministers such as Douglas Hurd and John Patten, the promotion of volunteering sought to compensate for the rolling back of the state under Thatcher, but was also based on the view that the promotion of good citizens and the building of social capital was a desirable end in itself (Kisby, 2010). Whether Cameron's 'big society' amounts to anything more than an attempt to replace state provision with voluntarism remains to be seen. Moreover, despite considerable investment in promoting social capital under Labour (Dobrowolsky and Lister, 2008), it remains far from clear that voluntary groups and social enterprises have the capacity to provide a serious alternative to the state in the provision of public services, particularly without substantial state funding. Moreover, as Kisby argues, while some groups may be well placed to take advantage of the opportunities offered by 'the big society', those in disadvantaged communities with less social capital, the very groups identified as inhabiting 'broken Britain', may become even more disadvantaged and marginalised (Kisby, 2010).

Central factors in the development of 'the big society', and more particularly the success of 'big society' policies, may therefore include public understanding, willingness and, crucially, capacity to take responsibility for services previously provided by the state. This article seeks to identify the potential for mobilising individuals by examining public attitudes towards 'the big society' since the 2010 general election. It begins with a brief survey of the various iterations of 'the big society' as set out in a series of high-profile speeches by the Prime Minister. Drawing on opinion poll data, the article then examines public recognition and understanding of 'the big society', and support for some of the policies it encompasses. It moves on to identify some of the challenges involved in promoting voluntarism as a substitute for state provision, by looking more broadly at attitudes towards some of the central features of 'the big society', most notably the public response to a decline in state provision and whether there has been a commensurate increase in the public appetite for greater personal involvement in services in their communities.

'The big society'

In the Hugo Young Memorial Lecture in November 2009, David Cameron launched a pointed attack on the growth in the welfare state under Labour. Cameron argued that the expansion in state provision under Labour had served to undermine traditional notions of personal and social responsibility, and 'has reached a point where it is now inhibiting, not advancing the progressive aims of reducing poverty, fighting inequality and increasing general well-being' (Cameron, 2009). The state had failed, he claimed, because, as it expanded, 'it took away from people more and more things that they should and could be doing for themselves, their families and their neighbours'. The answer, he asserted, was to give power back to individuals and communities, 'our alternative to big government is the big society'. In an effort to pre-empt criticism that this was merely a cover for withdrawing state provision, Cameron argued that 'a simplistic retrenchment of the state which assumes that better alternatives to state action will just spring to life unbidden is wrong'. The 'big society', he added, 'is not just going to spring into life on its own', rather the Conservatives would 'use the state to remake society'. What exactly this would involve was not made clear, although Cameron identified three groups which would be central to 'the big society', these were remarkably broad and all encompassing: social entrepreneurs, community activists and 'the majority of the population' (Cameron, 2009).

Some meat was added to the bones of 'the big society' during the 2010 general election campaign. At a set piece launch in March 2010, attended by eleven members of the Shadow Cabinet, 'the big society' was presented as an ambitious plan to build 'a fairer, richer, safer Britain, where opportunity is equal and poverty is abolished' (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2010: 135). The Conservative manifesto, which was launched the following month, claimed that 'plans to reform public services, mend our broken society, and rebuild trust in politics are all part of our Big Society agenda'. More specifically, it referred to the creation of a Big Society Bank, funded from unclaimed bank assets to finance neighbourhood groups, charities and other non-governmental social enterprises; new powers to enable parents to set up schools; allow communities to take over local amenities such as parks and libraries and to hold the police to account through neighbourhood beat meetings; the establishment of a National Citizen Service through which sixteen year olds would get the opportunity to develop the skills needed to be an active citizen; and a

14

range of measures designed to stimulate social action such as an annual Big Society Day, and a Big Lottery Fund focused on supporting social action (Conservative Party, 2010). The manifesto was clearly an attempt to link 'the big society' to some concrete policy proposals, although as Kavanagh and Cowley (2010) observed, many of these policies, including allowing local groups to set up schools, were not new.

In government, Cameron has remained committed to 'the big society' and has invested considerable personal capital in it. Although it featured only tangentially in the Coalition *Our Programme for Government* (HM Government, 2010), suggesting that the Liberal Democrats were perhaps not entirely happy with the idea, it has been the subject of four re-launches since the formation of the Coalition government. The first in May 2010 involved an event at Downing Street with community activists from around the country, at which Cameron declared his hope that 'the big society' would be 'one of the great legacies of this government'. In one of their first public speeches together, the Deputy Prime Minister was present to endorse the programme by observing, 'we've been using different words for a long time and actually they mean the same thing. "Liberalism"; "Big Society"'; "Empowerment"; "Responsibility"' (Cameron and Clegg, 2010). The launch also coincided with the publication of a document outlining the five 'policies' which 'the big society' encompassed: giving communities more powers; encouraging people to take an active role in their communities; the transfer of power from central to local government; support for cooperatives, mutuals, charities and social enterprises; and the publication of government data.

A second re-launch took place two months later in Liverpool, in which the Prime Minister, this time flanked by the screenwriter Phil Redmond, declared that 'the big society' was 'the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street'. On this occasion, he stated that there were three strands to 'the big society': social action, public service reform and community empowerment. He also announced the creation of four 'vanguard communities', two in the North of England, in the Eden Valley and Liverpool, and two in the South, in Windsor and Maidenhead and the London Borough of Sutton, which would be 'training grounds' for 'the big society' (Cameron, 2010).

Cameron returned to 'the big society' for a speech in February 2011, in an apparent effort to respond to some of the growing criticism of the programme. This speech was to some extent an attempt to shore up 'the big society' following the announcement earlier that month that one of the four vanguard communities, Liverpool, had withdrawn from the programme, claiming that spending cuts were undermining 'the big society'. Cameron accepted that there had been criticism, including that the policy was vague, that it was being undermined by spending cuts or that it was simply a cover for cuts. He responded by stating that the government was being quite open about the need for cuts and that 'the big society' was to some extent a response to this. With regard to the potential impact of cuts on the programme itself, Cameron announced that £200 million was being placed in the Big Society Bank, and in response to criticism that the policy was too vague, he once again asserted there were three parts to 'the big society', although on this occasion he claimed they were devolving more power to local level, opening up public services to make them less monolithic and more philanthropic giving and volunteering (Cameron, 2011a).

This latter emphasis on charitable giving was at the heart of the fourth post-election iteration of 'the big society' in May 2011, which coincided with the publication of a White

Paper on giving that included a range of measures designed to encourage and make it easier to donate money to good causes. These included arrangements with the banks to make it easier to make donations through cash machines, reducing the paperwork on gift-aid and changes to the rates of inheritance tax on estates which leave 10 per cent or more to charity (HM Government, 2011). In his accompanying speech, Cameron had now refined his conception of 'the big society' to two broad themes: modernisation of the public services, and social responsibility (Cameron, 2011b).

Public recognition of 'the big society'

As Cameron has to some extent acknowledged, the public have struggled to understand what is meant by 'the big society'. Indeed, given its apparent lack of impact during the general election campaign it is perhaps surprising that the Prime Minister has remained so committed to the idea. Cameron was strongly criticised, not least from within his own party, for placing so much emphasis on 'the big society' during the Conservative general election campaign. In a widely read critique of the Conservative campaign, Tim Montgomerie, the editor of the ConservativeHome website, was harshly critical of the fact that 'the big society' message 'was never poll tested or properly focus grouped and failed to cut through on the doorstep' (Prabhakar, 2011: 34). Polling on 'the big society' suggested a widespread lack of recognition and understanding. An Ipsos MORI poll undertaken in May 2010 shortly after the election asked people whether they recalled hearing about 'the big society' during the general election campaign: 42 per cent said they had heard about it whilst 57 per cent said they had not. Perhaps more significantly, when those who said they had heard about 'the big society' were asked what they knew about it, 4 per cent claimed to knew a great deal, 27 per cent knew a fair amount, 36 per cent said they did not know very much and 33 per cent knew nothing (Ipsos MORI, 2010b).

Further polls suggest that there has been little increase either in public recognition or understanding of 'the big society'. Ipsos-MORI polled twice more on whether people had heard about 'the big society', in July and September 2010. The July poll, which took place in the week following Cameron's Liverpool speech, did suggest an increase in public recognition, with more than 50 per cent of respondents claiming they had heard of 'the big society'. However, by September levels of recognition had fallen back almost to the level of the general election (Table 1).

Similarly, despite the series of high-profile re-launches there has been little discernible increase in public understanding of what is meant by 'the big society'. In July 2010, just before the second re-launch, YouGov asked respondents to rank their knowledge of 'the big society' on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 meant they had no knowledge and 10 meant a great deal of knowledge. Only 1 per cent claimed a great deal of knowledge and 20 per cent rated their knowledge between 6 and 10, whilst 37 per cent said they had no knowledge (YouGov, 2010). Perhaps more significantly, a series of polls in 2011 and 2012 (Table 2) indicated that there was little evidence of an increase in public understanding.

Support for 'the big society'

Whilst there is little evidence that the public has anything more than a general understanding of 'the big society', if indeed they have heard of it at all, when prompted about what 'the big society' might entail there does appear to be some public support.

Table 1   Public Recognition of 'the big society'. Recently David Cameron and the Conservative Party have been talking about their plans to create a 'Big Society' in Britain do you remember hearing anything about this, or not?

	May 2010	July 2010	September 2010
Yes	42	52	45
No	57	47	55
Don't know	1	*	*

Note: wording in May was during the recent election campaign.
Source: Ipsos MORI, 2010e.

Table 2   Public understanding of 'the big society'. How well if at all do you understand what David Cameron means when he talks about a 'Big Society'?

	January 2011	February 2011	May 2011	February/March 2012
Very well	6	3	5	3
Fairly well	22	21	24	29
Total well	28	24	29	32
Not well	28	43	33	34
Not at all	35	29	29	29
Total not well	63	72	62	63
Don't know	9	5	10	5

Source: YouGov, 2011a, b, c; YouGov, 2012.

Table 3   Public Support for 'the big society'. In principle does 'the Big Society' sound like a good idea?

	January 2011	February 2011	May 2011	Feb–March 2012
A good idea	46	49	45	45
A bad idea	31	31	34	32
Don't know	23	20	22	23

Source: YouGov, 2011a, b, c; YouGov, 2012.

When, in the same series of YouGov polls as above, individuals were told that 'the big society' involved giving more power to individuals and local communities by taking power away from government and allowing voluntary groups and communities to run public services, more people responded that this in principle sounded like a good idea rather than a bad idea. However, more than one in five still did not know (Table 3).

However, as others have observed, it may be that there is little to object to in the implication that 'the big society' simply involves empowering communities without any more detailed explanation about what that might entail (Kisby, 2010). Moreover, there is

Table 4 Those who think 'the big society' is a good thing. The government's plans for creating a 'Big Society' involve *giving responsibility/providing support* to individuals like you to help themselves and their communities, rather than relying on services provided by local authorities or the government. (% who think this is a good thing).

	For you personally	For your local area	For Britain as a whole
Giving responsibility	36	45	45
Providing support	44	54	55
Total	40	49	50

Source: Ipsos MORI, 2010c.

Table 5 Do you think the government's policies to create a 'Big Society' will actually work?

	January 2011	February 2011	May 2011	Feb–March 2012
Will probably work	11	10	9	9
Will probably not work	68	71	73	73
Don't know	21	18	18	19

Source: YouGov, 2011a, b, c; YouGov, 2012.

also some evidence that public support may be affected by relatively subtle changes in the way in which 'the big society' is presented. In July 2010, Ipsos MORI told people that 'the big society' involved either 'giving responsibility' or 'providing support' to individuals 'to help themselves and their communities, rather than relying on services provided by local authorities or the government' (Table 4). In response they found that there was more support when people were told that 'the big society' involved 'providing support' to individuals compared to when it was described as 'giving responsibility' (Ipsos MORI, 2010c). If the use of language is a significant factor in public support for 'the big society', then the lack of clarity in the Prime Minister's various public statements and the evident lack of public understanding may be a significant barrier to public support for 'the big society'.

There is also evidence of greater public support when 'the big society' is linked to specific policy proposals. When 'the big society' was linked to a Big Society Bank to fund community activities and a National Citizen Service for sixteen year olds, 44 per cent of people thought this was a good idea, whilst only 16 per cent were opposed. Even proposals for an annual Big Society Day to celebrate neighbourhood groups received the support of 39 per cent of those polled. Interestingly, these proposals received relatively high levels of support amongst young people, those aged eighteen to twenty-four and full-time students, but less support from those age groups which claimed the most knowledge of 'the big society' (YouGov, 2010).

While some people undoubtedly think that 'the big society' sounds like a good idea, there is considerable scepticism as to whether it will actually work in practice, and the public appears to have grown more sceptical about this (Table 5). Only around 10 per cent of the public think the government will be successful in creating a 'big society',

whilst around 70 per cent think that it probably will not work. Perhaps most significantly, the growth in scepticism is most marked among Conservative voters. In January 2011, 42 per cent of Conservative respondents felt that 'the big society' would not work, whilst 28 per cent thought it would, by May 2011 this had risen to 62 per cent, with only 19 per cent believing the policy would work (YouGov, 2011a, b, c; YouGov 2012). Once again, there appears to be less scepticism when people were asked about particular aspects of the programme, although a large proportion of the public clearly remain doubtful. For example, in February 2011 ComRes asked if 'the big society' would succeed in fostering a culture of volunteerism: 38 per cent said it would not, whilst 17 per cent thought it would. Similarly, only 16 per cent thought it would redistribute power from central government to ordinary citizens, whilst 42 per cent thought it would not. What is also significant about this poll, and is characteristic of many polls on 'the big society', was the large number of respondents who said they did not know. In the case of the two questions posed by ComRes above, 36 and 41 per cent respectively said they did not know. This almost certainly reflects the widespread lack of recognition and understanding of 'the big society' (59 per cent of respondents to the ComRes poll said they did not know what it meant) (ComRes, 2011), although it may also suggest a significant proportion of individuals who might be persuaded of its value.

However, data from a range of polls also suggest that a significant proportion of the public continue to view 'the big society' as little more than a device to mask public spending cuts. In a YouGov poll for *The Sun*, taken in July 2010 shortly after the second re-launch, 48 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that 'The Big Society isn't really about encouraging volunteers or devolving power; it is just a way of cutting the money spent on public services' (YouGov, 2010). An Ipsos MORI poll the same month found that 57 per cent of respondents agreed that it was 'just an excuse' to save money by cutting public services (Ipsos MORI, 2010c), and in a ComRes poll taken in February 2011, half of those polled agreed that 'the big society is largely just a gimmick', whilst only 17 per cent disagreed (ComRes, 2011). In three YouGov polls in January, February and May 2011, between 58 and 59 per cent of respondents agreed that 'the big society' was 'mostly just hot air' and was being used as a cover for cuts (YouGov, 2011a, b, c).

'A large untapped resource'? From state action to social action

While there is little evidence for widespread public understanding of 'the big society', coupled in some cases with considerable evidence of scepticism, bordering on cynicism, about the reasons for Cameron's commitment to it, some polls do suggest potential public support for the principles behind it, most notably empowering individuals, families and local communities.

In a briefing entitled *Do the Public Really Want to Join the Government of Britain?*, published shortly before the 2010 general election, Ipsos MORI (2010a) looked back at attitudes towards public involvement over the previous decade. It presented a complex picture of public attitudes towards personal involvement in local communities and the provision of services. They argued that while large proportions of the public claim to want to get involved in decision-making at both a local level (48 per cent) and a national level (43 per cent), very few (4 per cent) said they were currently involved and only 5 per cent wanted to be actively involved. Nevertheless, a much larger proportion, 24 per cent, wanted 'more of a say', and there was clearly a demand for greater transparency

in decision-making with 47 per cent wanting more information. However, in some key policy areas, most notably schools or services provided by the police, Ipsos MORI reported that the majority of people were happy with their current level of involvement. In the case of schools in particular, less than a quarter supported the idea of schools being set up by private companies, religious groups, charities or parents, in contrast to the 62 per cent who felt that local councils were the most appropriate bodies to run schools (Ipsos MORI, 2010a).

The Hansard Society's annual audit of political engagement which surveyed individuals in December 2010 and January 2011 focused in particular on civic as well as political engagement and how this might impact upon the government's 'big society' agenda. The survey found that 69 per cent of people had an interest in finding out how things work in their local area, compared to 58 per cent who had an interest in politics in general. Half of those surveyed also felt that they could make a difference by getting involved in their local community, compared to 30 per cent who felt they could change the way the country was run by getting involved in politics. However, the number of people who wanted to get involved in decision-making in their local area had fallen by five points to 43 per cent since the previous audit, and only 10 per cent said they would definitely undertake some form of voluntary work in the next two years (Hansard Society, 2011).

These data suggest that the government has a long way to go in order to increase the level of public involvement in local communities and services. However, both the Ipsos MORI analysis and the Hansard Society's audit suggest that there is significant potential for greater public involvement. Both highlight the fact that there are a considerable number of people who are interested in getting involved but who are not currently active. Ipsos MORI (2010b) refers to 'a large untapped resource' of people who want to get involved, whilst the Hansard Society noted that particularly amongst the younger cohort, 'there is some untapped potential to be exploited in terms of civic engagement' (Hansard Society, 2011: 46).

The London Olympics and Paralympics of 2012 provided a dramatic example of the potential for mobilising large numbers of volunteers. In August 2012, 70,000 volunteers acted as 'Games Makers', undertaking a wide range of roles across Olympic venues. While the long-term impact is as yet unclear, official data indicated an increase in the level of volunteering in 2012 (figure 1), which was widely credited as being inspired by the Olympics and was hailed by the government as a vindication of 'the big society' agenda (Cabinet Office, 2013a). However, the rise followed a period of decline in volunteering and as a result took volunteering back to a level similar to that of the mid-2000s. Interestingly, the Department of Communities and Local Government citizenship survey, from which these data are derived, was cancelled in January 2011, and the government only recommended collecting data on the extent of volunteering in August 2012, with the result that the figures for 2012 represent the three months which included and followed the Olympics.

Moreover, the figures for formal volunteering, which represents the kind of commitment which will be required for groups to take over the running of services currently provided by the state, are considerably lower than those for informal volunteering. Around one in four are involved in formal volunteering at least once a month, compared with a third who volunteered informally, and less than half are involved in formal volunteering on an annual basis, compared with two-thirds who
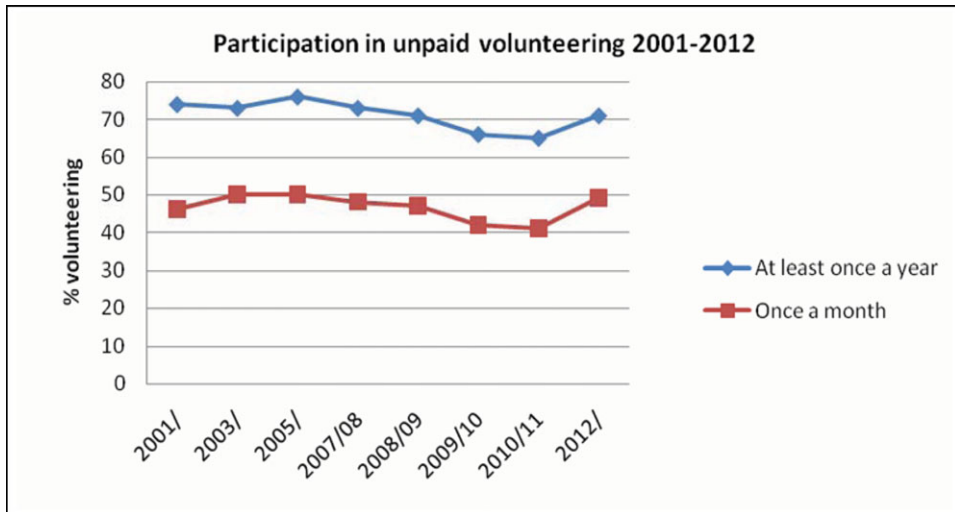
Figure 1. (Colour online) Participation in volunteering 2001–2012
Source: Cabinet Office, 2013b.

claim to have volunteered informally (Cabinet Office, 2013b). Similarly, data from *British Social Attitudes* indicate that while a large proportion of the public consistently report undertaking some voluntary activity once or twice a year, the activist core which may be prepared to volunteer on a more regular basis may be less than 10 per cent (Johnston and Jowell, 1999). Moreover, comparative data indicate that the level of participation in voluntary organisations is lower in less-affluent countries and those with higher levels of inequality (Whiteley, 2008), which raises further questions about the government's ability to stimulate social action during a recession and while also introducing significant cuts in support for those who are less well off.

As this suggests, there are a number of important barriers to the government's likely ability to exploit the untapped potential of volunteers. In a critique of 'the big society' for the New Economics Foundation, Coote stressed that building 'the big society' 'depends crucially on people having enough time to engage in local action', and that some have more control over their time than others (Coote, 2010). The studies by Ipsos MORI and the Hansard Society both indicate that the most common reason for people not getting involved in community action is that they simply do not have the time. Moreover, the Hansard Society identified those who express the most willingness to do voluntary work are aged under forty-five (particularly in the twenty-five to thirty-four age bracket), those in the highest social grades (ABC1) and people with children. Yet it is those aged fifty-five and over who are most likely to get involved (Hansard Society, 2011). Interestingly, this is also the group who claim to have the most understanding of 'the big society', while those under forty claim to have the least understanding (YouGov, 2011a, b, c). While this may mean that there is a significant group of potential volunteers, it is hard to see how many, in particular, working parents with young families, are likely to carve out more time to undertake voluntary work.

Finally, while polls indicate that a large proportion of the public support greater involvement in local communities as a positive aspiration, and may even be prepared to undertake such activities, there is also a strong sense that this should not replace existing state-run services. Long-running surveys such as *British Social Attitudes* suggest that there is compelling evidence that the public remain committed to a high level of state provision in a number of areas (Defty, 2011), and recent polls suggest that even where the public is enthusiastic about increased participation by individuals and local organisations, there is little evidence of decline in support for state provision. The Hansard Society found that many participants were adamant that 'the voluntary work being encouraged should not be a replacement for current existing roles, but rather seek to augment them: in essence, they did not want people to lose their jobs and be replaced by volunteers' (Hansard Society, 2011: 46). Furthermore, there is some evidence of considerable scepticism about the ability of individuals or the private sector to deliver services which are currently provided by the public sector. In a poll in August 2010, only a quarter of respondents felt that individuals should have more responsibility for delivering local public services, while half agreed that it was the council's job to deliver local public services (Ipsos MORI, 2010d). There was even more scepticism about the private sector's ability to make up for job losses in the public sector, with a poll in November 2010 indicating that only 15 per cent thinking there would be enough new jobs available in the private sector to make up for job losses in the public sector, while 80 per cent believed the shortfall could not be met by private sector jobs (Ipsos MORI, 2010f).

Conclusions

Despite a strong commitment and significant publicity, including four high profile speeches by the Prime Minister, there is little evidence of widespread public recognition of 'the big society' or of any increase in recognition since the general election. Moreover, even among those who have heard about it, there is little evidence of a clear understanding about what 'the big society' means. There is also evidence that in the absence of a clear understanding of what it means a significant proportion of the public simply assume that 'the big society' is a cover for public spending cuts. Even among those who claim to have some understanding, and who are broadly supportive of it in principle, there is considerable scepticism about whether the government can be successful in implementing 'the big society'. What is particularly striking is that there has been little discernible decline in public cynicism or scepticism about 'the big society' since the general election, and indeed there is evidence that the public have become more sceptical. Moreover, if public scepticism is to some degree prompted by the government's programme of spending cuts, then public support for 'the big society' seems likely to decline further as cuts begin to have more impact.

However, public opinion data do also suggest that there is some scope for generating support for 'the big society'. The fact that a significant proportion of the public believe it is a good idea in principle suggests the potential to generate support. It is also apparent that when given more details about what 'the big society' might involve in practice, the public tend to be more supportive, which suggests that the problem is at least in part one of communication. There is also some evidence that a proportion of the public would like more involvement in decision-making and activities in their local communities. There are a significant number of willing volunteers who could potentially help to build 'the big

society'. However, the government faces a considerable task in motivating these people. The number of people volunteering has remained fairly static in recent years, and there may be significant barriers to people getting more involved in community activities. At the same time, while the public may aspire to greater involvement, there is little evidence that they think this should replace state provision as the government hopes. At present, the government has gone some way towards persuading the public about the value of 'the big society', although it has had little impact on people's actions. It has been somewhat less successful in persuading the public that this should be combined with a significant reduction in state provision.

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