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The role for well-being in creating the Big Society

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Authors: Victoria Bradford, Consultant, CLES, 0161 236 7036, victoriabradford@cles.org.uk and Jessica Smith, Policy Researcher, CLES, 0161 236 7036, jessicasmith@cles.org.uk

Editor: Jessica Smith, Policy Researcher, CLES

1. Introduction

In the last ten years we have seen a growing body of commentators, academics and policy analysts voicing concern that orthodox measurements of growth and development, namely GDP, have failed to take into account the importance of happiness and individual well-being: a contented state of being happy, healthy and prosperous.

In the UK, this has been echoed by a number of key policies and trends. Most recently, David Cameron announced the coalition's intention to start measuring the well-being of the nation through a household survey administered by ONS. Prior to this, the Local Government Act of 2000 introduced new powers to local government to promote or improve the economic, social or environmental well-being of their area. More recently, the Sustainable Communities Act 2007 provided an opportunity for councils and communities to put forward new thinking on how best to improve quality of life and well-being in their local area. More broadly we have seen a growing recognition amongst policy makers of the need to develop holistic interventions which reflect the multi-faceted nature of many contemporary social challenges.

More recently, the concept of the Big Society has come to the fore following the election of a Conservative-Liberal Coalition Government in May 2010. Whilst the concept is still in its infancy, all signs suggest that the Big Society, and the parallel localism agenda, will be a cornerstone of the Coalition Government's approach.

The Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLEES) has watched the emergence of both agendas, well-being and the Big Society, with great interest. In the past two years, CLEES has been working on the Big Lottery Fund national well-being evaluation, whilst CLEES' policy research team have analysed and commented on the Coalition Government's emerging policy around Big Society. In this Local Work we bring together this understanding to explore the relationship between well-being and Big Society. Whilst the article will be of interest to all those working in local economic development and regeneration, it is written with a voluntary and community sector audience in mind. In this article we aim to go some way towards answering the following key questions:

- What is the role of well-being in achieving Big Society and what can Big Society do to improve well-being?
- What are the opportunities and challenges of linking the two issues?

2. Well-being and the Big Society: opportunities and challenges

The Big Society has emerged as one of the most prominent and indeed contentious concepts of the Coalition Government. For some, the concept presents a real opportunity to nurture greater personal and civic responsibility, giving individuals the autonomy to solve the issues that affect their communities. For others, the concept is merely a distraction from the billions of pounds worth of cuts that will be made to the public sector and a way of 'rolling back the State'.

Debates will continue about the underlying ideological principles of the Big Society; however it is clear that the Coalition Government is committed to the concept and this commitment will have a significant effect on voluntary and community sector organisations in particular.

Whilst it pre-dates the current government, the well-being agenda has gained support from the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. This support was illustrated by David Cameron's announcement of the National Well-being Project in late November 2010 and the intention to measure the nation's well-being through a household survey administered by ONS which is currently open to public consultation.¹

2.1 The policy landscape

For the Coalition Government, the Big Society is a vision for greater personal, professional and civic responsibility where social problems are solved by the communities they affect; social action is prioritised over state intervention: *'the innovation and enthusiasm of civil society is essential in tackling the social, economic and political challenges that the UK faces'*.²

Published shortly after the election result, the coalition document³ sets out agreements on different areas of policy, including the government's approach to the voluntary and community sector and the Big Society, which is at the heart of the Coalition Government's policy making. David Cameron has outlined the key strands of the Big Society agenda as follows:

- **Social action**

According to Cameron, the Big Society is a call for greater social action: for people to give up their time, effort and money to support local causes as part of a new culture of voluntarism and philanthropy. In particular, it proposes a new model of public service delivery in which services are provided by social enterprises led by frontline workers, owned by them and the communities they serve. For example, the Conservatives would like to see parents setting up new schools in communities, and take over threatened local amenities such as parks and libraries.

- **Public service reform**

A second element of the Big Society concept is that of the government's aspiration to dismantle centralised bureaucracy. For the Coalition Government, state intervention has extended too far and public services need to be opened up to alternative deliverers, including charities, social enterprises, communities and private companies, with the aim of encouraging more innovation, diversity and responsiveness to public need.

- **Community empowerment**

The third key theme of the Big Society agenda is community empowerment. In contrast to needs based approaches to community development in which outside organisations and initiatives identify the needs, problems and solutions for deprived communities, community empowerment seeks to raise communities' capacity to work together and take action on the social issues that affect them. As such, Big Society attempts to increase levels of personal responsibility and encourage communities to become more self reliant.

2.2 Understanding the connections

Despite the Coalition Government's announcement of their intention to measure well-being, the term does not feature prominently in descriptions of the Big Society. There are, however, clear links to be made between the two agendas which we explore in the section that follows. The connections between Big Society and well-being are illustrated with case studies that CLES and nef have encountered in the course of the two organisations' evaluation of the Big Lottery Fund well-being programme.

- **Social action and well-being**

According to the Coalition Government, the Big Society is a call for greater social action: for people to give up their time, effort and money to support local causes as part of a new culture of voluntarism and philanthropy. The Government hopes that by reducing the role of the state, greater responsibility will be devolved to the local level and that, in response, residents will rise to the challenge of taking greater control over shaping their local area and responding to local challenges.

Academic studies have demonstrated that volunteering can have a positive effect on a range of aspects of individual well-being, including: happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, sense of control over life, improved physical health and alleviating depression⁴. There is at least in principle the potential for the Big Society to promote higher levels of well-being amongst individuals. The prominence of the Big Society agenda also places renewed emphasis on the role of the voluntary and community sector in society. It is an opportune time for organisations to evaluate their role generally and to consider specifically how their well-being activities might fit with the principles and priorities of the Big Society.

Case study: Volunteering increases a person's sense of well-being

As part of the Cornwall Healthy Living Centre's Pathways to Health and Well-being project, volunteers are paired with organisations or individuals who need assistance, friendship or social interaction. The idea behind this is that the recipient benefits from the services or time given by the volunteer, often in practical way, but also that the volunteer has an increased sense of purpose and self esteem as a result of volunteering. In addition, the volunteer and the recipient benefit from increased social interaction and reduced social isolation.

Further information:

<http://www.westbank.org.uk/south-west-well%11being/south-west-well%11being-partners/west-cornwall-healthy-living-centre,-penzance/>

- **Public service reform and well-being**

Big Society is also about opening up the running of public services to alternative deliverers in order to dismantle 'centralised bureaucracy'. Alternative delivery organisations could include charities, social enterprises, communities and private companies. There is also renewed enthusiasm for mutualism. In particular, the Coalition Government proposes a new model of public service delivery in which services are provided by social enterprises led by frontline workers, owned by them and the communities they serve.

Providers of well-being interventions are going to have to look at alternative funding streams and may need to demonstrate a broader remit than previously required. However, the end of ring-fenced grants could potentially afford greater creativity and flexibility in service design and in the process of commissioning the voluntary and community sector.

Case study: Enhancing well-being through holistic support to communities

Key Enterprises is a charity providing training and development opportunities to individuals with a moderate to severe mental health condition or learning difficulties. As a result of participating in the activities and training provided by Key Enterprises, beneficiaries reported a greater ability to live independently, increased interest in activities outside of their working day which has helped prevent the onset of depression; and a greater desire and ability to eat healthily. Social enterprises and charities are accustomed to working in this way and can build on their experience of doing so to deliver services in the future.

Further information:

<http://www.key-enterprises.com/>

- **Community empowerment and well-being**

In order for Big Society to develop, the Coalition Government believe that it is vital that residents feel empowered. Community empowerment covers a broad range of activities: from efforts to enhance residents' skills, for example supporting people to bid for public sector contracts, to encouraging a sense of community confidence and activism. These are activities which increase the sense of well-being a person may feel and are activities that are often an inherent part of well-being projects.

A higher level of well-being within communities is likely to support the Big Society as people who are happy and healthy are more likely to be able and willing to come forward as volunteers.

Recruiting volunteers to deliver the Big Society may be challenging, however, as there are numerous potential barriers that can inhibit individuals becoming active citizens, including: caring responsibilities, poor physical and/or mental health, or a lack of confidence. There is a convincing argument to be made that activities to support well-being will be important if individuals are to have the capacity to participate in the Big Society. As such, there is potential for a mutually reinforcing relationship between the Big Society and well-being.

Case study: Enhancing well-being assets increases the likelihood of a person volunteering

By being involved with the Cycle Champions project in South Yorkshire, several beneficiaries, who were new to cycling, have not only become proficient cyclists but are also now real advocates for the sport and for making cycling accessible for all. With new found confidence, self esteem, enthusiasm and better personal health they volunteer their time to help deliver cycling sessions, act as 'champions' for cycling more generally and have become involved in other projects as volunteers such as Health Champions.

Further information:

<http://www.ctc.org.uk/desktopdefault.aspx?tabid=5127>

3. Delivering well-being and Big Society

As this Local Work has demonstrated above, there are real opportunities for the Big Society and well-being agendas to complement one another. However, there remain a number of key challenges for voluntary and community sector organisations to consider which we highlight below.

- **Delivering in the context of cuts**

The recently announced public sector cuts present challenges to all areas of the economy, including the voluntary and community sector. With significant cuts to public sector funding, local authorities and other public sector bodies, there will be fewer discretionary funding streams available. Furthermore, at the same time, voluntary and community sector organisations may experience a rise in demand for their services as public sector services are cut back. With fewer resources for managing, facilitating or developing volunteers, developing an unpaid workforce might also be problematic.

- **Nurturing relationships with ‘unusual suspects’**

Public sector cuts will mean that some of the organisations that voluntary and community sector organisations have traditionally sought funding from, such as Strategic Health Authorities, may no longer function in the same way. This will mean that the voluntary and community sector will have to be flexible in their approach to seeking funding and may need to consider developing new collaborative relationships, for example, developing links with private sector organisations (e.g. contracting, sub-contracting or working with social finance intermediaries). It may also be necessary to develop strategies to increase the amount of funding received via charitable giving and philanthropy, either from individuals or as part of businesses’ corporate social responsibility functions.

- **Developing the capacity to operate competitively**

With the emphasis on voluntary and community sector organisations bidding for opportunities to deliver public services, the Big Society agenda potentially presents an opportunity for the sector to enter into a more sustainable funding relationship than offered under the grants-based approach to funding. However, this will mean that smaller voluntary and community sector organisations will require the capacity to operate competitively in bidding for contracts.

4. Key considerations for enhancing well-being and creating the Big Society

In the final part of this Local Work, we set out some key considerations that may help voluntary and community sector organisations in particular to make the link between Big Society and well-being.

- **Demonstrating impact**

As ring-fenced budgets disappear, voluntary and community sector organisations will have to demonstrate their impacts in terms of broader outcomes, such as the well-being of beneficiaries and the wider community. As previously mentioned, how to measure well-being is currently open to public consultation by the ONS. Through Big Lottery Fund national well-being evaluation, CLES has been working to develop ways to measure, value, assess and understand well-being gains and have come to the conclusion that measuring well-being requires a blend of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Asking closed or even open questions through a survey or questionnaires certainly has its advantages but having a more detailed conversation, conducting a fuller interview and getting to the bottom of some of these issues, or at least understanding why, is also important, especially for something as complex as well-being.⁵

- **Working with corporate partners / the private sector**

The Big Society agenda, and the parallel Localism agenda, emphasises the Coalition Government’s aspiration for a diversity of public service providers: i.e. it carves out a greater role for the private and voluntary and community sector to bid for public sector contracts. Not all voluntary and community sector organisations will have the capacity to partake in this process and collaborating with the private sector may be one way of benefitting from any potential opportunities to emerge from the Localism agenda.

The Big Society agenda also emphasises the importance of corporate social responsibility and corporate social activism, indeed it is the Coalition Government’s intention that this will compensate for the shortfall in public sector funding that voluntary and community sector organisations are due to receive. Should this movement in policy prove successful in instigating a new climate of philanthropy, there may be opportunities for the voluntary and community sector to enhance their relationship with the private sector and benefit from a wider range of funding streams. Moreover, effective collaborations between the two sectors have the potential to raise the capacity of voluntary and community sector organisations, for example through mentoring or staff secondments. For private sector partners, joining forces with the voluntary and community sector to promote volunteering, for example, has the potential to enhance employees’ well-being and morale.

- **Economic value or return on investment**

It will become increasingly important for voluntary and community sector organisations to measure the full economic value of their services or the return on investment generated by their interventions. This will help make the case for commissioning well-being related services, even in a restricted funding environment. For more information on how CLES can support this type of activity, please contact Victoria Bradford, Consultant at CLES.⁶

- **Full cost recovery**

Applying full cost recovery for commissioned services will help to reinforce the value of services and demonstrate that voluntary and community sector organisations are not just seen as the 'cheapest option'.

- **Managing increased demand**

Using existing capacity in the smartest way will be important. This might involve developing and delivering a range of services (with different levels of intensity for different needs) to help manage increased demand and make best use of scarce resources (both people and finances). It might also mean recruiting volunteers or working with corporate partners.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this Local Work was to explore the links between two important policy agendas: the Big Society and the well-being agenda. For CLES, realising the potential opportunities that the Big Society presents in terms of the development of localised and bespoke services will require significant 'ground work'. Some communities will be better placed than others to rise to the challenge of designing and delivering services. Continued promotion of the well-being agenda and support for well-being related interventions will be an important element of helping to ensure that communities have the opportunity to participate in the Big Society. As the Big Society agenda takes shape, there is potential for the renewed emphasis on volunteering and social action to also have a positive impact on individuals' well-being.

Here at CLES, we will watch with interest as the two agendas develop further. In the next few months, the latest report and findings from the Big Lottery Fund national well-being evaluation will be published. In this report we will look in more detail at the changes in respondents' feelings and behaviours as a result of being involved in Big Lottery Fund funded projects and programmes and importantly how these changes impact on other aspects of people's lives such as social well-being, volunteerism and the Big Society.

¹ This is currently out for consultation. To respond visit the ONS website: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/well-being>

² HM Government (2010), 'The Coalition: our programme for government', accessed at: http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_stories/2010/05/The_Coalitions_Programme_for_Government.aspx

³ HM Government (2010), 'The Coalition: our programme for government', accessed at: http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_stories/2010/05/The_Coalitions_Programme_for_Government.aspx

⁴ Thoits, P. A. & Hewitt, L. N. (2001), 'Volunteer Work and Well-being', *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 2001, Volume 42, Issue 2, pp.151-131

⁵ For more on our approach, see: <http://www.newstartmag.co.uk/blog/article/measuring-wellbeing-matters-but/>

⁶ Victoria Bradford, Consultant, CLES, 0161 236 7036, victoriabradford@cles.org.uk

Local Work is one of a series of regular policy reports produced by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES). CLES is the leading membership organisation in the UK dedicated to economic development, regeneration and local governance. CLES undertakes a range of activities including independent research, events and training, publications and consultancy. CLES also manages the monthly New Start digital magazine, through its new CLES online service, which provides comprehensive analysis and commentary on current policy and good practice.

Centre for Local Economic Strategies & CLES Consulting
Express Networks • 1 George Leigh Street • Manchester M4 5DL • tel 0161 236 7036 • fax 0161 236 1891 • info@cles.org.uk • www.cles.org.uk