



Regional **Faiths Network** North East



NEEP
North East Empowerment Partnership



Report on “Having Faith in the Big Society - a conversation for our times?”

on Thursday, 25th November 2010

at Durham County Cricket Club, The Riverside, Chester le Street

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The ‘*Having Faith in the Big Society*’ event was commissioned by the North East Regional Faiths Network (NERFN) in partnership with The Churches’ Regional Commission in the North East (CRC), Durham County Council and the North East Empowerment Partnership (NEEP).

The event was profiled as *A networking opportunity for those interested in inter faith relationships to meet and engage in critical debate about the ‘Big Society’ from a faith perspective.*

The ‘Big Society’ concept is central to the rhetoric of the new Coalition Government yet a clear or coherent definition remains to be offered by key government actors. Philip Angier, Chairperson and overall facilitator for the day drew on responses from the roundtable feedback and general contributions from the Plenary Session to summarise the **key messages and observations** from the day and to offer them for consideration next time:

‘A North East Faith Declaration on the Big Society’so far!

1. The Context

- The new Coalition Government brings fresh perspectives and new energy to public policy. We recognise in the ‘Big Society’ some aspirations and values which resonate with our own faith teachings and beliefs about community.
- However, the call to faith transcends party politics. We see in the Big Society agenda potential for adverse impact, both intended and unintended, upon individuals and communities. As faith communities we will engage with Government, offer constructive criticism where appropriate and defend the rights and dignity of the poor and marginalised.

2. The Big Society offers the opportunity for a cultural shift in relationships

- The Big Society offers new ways of looking at and working out community relationships. This can be energising and offers the opportunity to draw in new people.

- We see examples of positive behaviour shifts in individuals and communities in the changing attitudes to recycling and climate change. The Big Society allows communities to take ownership of priorities.

3. The Moral and Ethical Challenges - the risk of increasing inequalities

- The stronger, wealthier communities will find it easier to respond to the Big Society agenda. The weaker, more vulnerable communities will lose some of the support they currently receive, but will still be expected to do more with less.
- Without effective advocacy and support there is a risk of a growing social and economic divide.

4. Communities need leadership; leaders need training and capacity building

- Faith communities have traditionally seen it as part of their role to offer and to nurture leadership, especially in the most needy and vulnerable communities.
- For communities and community leaders fully to rise to the challenges of the Big Society they will need professionalism, organising and motivational skills. It is not clear how the training of such leaders will be resourced.

5. Community Organising is not the same as Community Development

- Faith groups have often been found at the core of long-term community development initiatives. We see community organising as more 'issue focused' and less concerned with the dignity of relationships.
- We have doubts that the Coalition Government's commitment to 5,000 community organisers will compensate for the expected loss of skills and funded community development support as a consequence of the Comprehensive Spending Review.

6. The best Community Leaders live within their community

- We need to re-affirm that communities are best led from within. Faith groups need to ask themselves how they will encourage potential leaders to live and work within marginalised communities to help them to respond to the challenges and opportunities of the Big Society.

7. Fear that the Big Society becomes seen as doing things on the cheap

- The Big Society agenda is being introduced at a time of national austerity and cut-backs in public services. This leads to the obvious danger that the Big Society will only be seen as another way of 'doing things on the cheap'.
- There is a risk for those who want to work with Government of being seen as a party to widespread job losses and reductions in benefits.
- Devolving service delivery to local communities should not become 'passing the buck' for a diminished quality of service

8. The role of local government is not clear

- The Big Society agenda seems to imply devolution of power beyond local authorities to immediate local communities and communities of interest.

- There appears to be a potential conflict between the local authority's duty of care and the proposal that choices about budget priorities will be taken at a more local level.

9. Can localism address difficult and complex social issues?

- Devolution to local communities may work well for some services – such as planning, environmental services and recreation – but we are concerned that it will not work to address some of the less attractive and more difficult social issues such as mental health services, drug and alcohol abuse.

10. Religious organisations and faith communities needs to retain their prophetic voice

- If the Church and different faith groups engage with the Big Society at a local level they must still maintain their prophetic voices against social injustice.

The Big Society – Conversations and Critique

Despite the severe weather, the event attracted 55 people from across the North East. Apologies were received from a further 25 people who had hoped to attend but met transport problems on the day – including one of the key speakers. So, a good deal of interest from a wide spectrum of people.

The structure of the day was uncomplicated, rational and focused. The morning session addressed the questions **“What do we understand by the Big Society? How is it different from what we are already doing?”**

In his welcome, Paul Southgate, Chief Officer of the Churches Regional Commission in the North East, reminded delegates of Pope Benedict's recent visit to the UK in which the Pope had called for a new conversation in the public square to establish a powerful commitment to social justice and the common good, and that the faiths were key to that task. Paul argued that the timeliness of this conversation was supported by the enormous social change currently in progress driven by the communications revolution, globalisation, growing diversity and the economic recession.

Getting the conversation underway: Ian Dodds, Head of Community Policy at Government Office North East, provided a keynote introduction to the Big Society, especially as it related to a policy of localism and a need for deficit reduction. Localism sought to shift the locus of power to communities, encourage more active neighbourly engagement, grow social capital and build a more resilient society.

Deficit reduction would lead to job losses, changes to the welfare state, increased demand on local services - especially by the most disadvantaged with the greatest need. The role of faith communities is important in this changing scenario: identifying potential community leaders, mobilising people, asking new questions about the delivery of services and proposing new ways of collaboration, countering any stigmatising tendency by making

communities more resilient, bringing people together to talk about the issues, advocating and acting on behalf of the smallest voices.

This set the scene for **six roundtable discussions** revealing diverse perspectives on the 'Big Society' such as:

- Big challenge, little resource; work will be the same, funding will be less
- Has potential for empowering communities but is this the government getting out of its responsibilities? Passing the buck? Work on the cheap?
- Public sector duties of Local Authorities may conflict with shifting power to communities – can Local Authorities also be 'liberated' in the same way?
- Shifting power – shifting blame – positive shifting of attitudes and behaviour
- Community organising is not community development; community workers have always supported, shared and educated; Community Development Workers are already doing what it suggested Community Organisers should do
- How will the resourcing needs of urban and rural communities be differentiated?
- Enabling people to get involved; wider commitment to be neighbourly
- The Big Society gives a better context to bring partners together, working more effectively in partnership with local people – a cultural shift
- Divisive – widening gap between 'haves' and 'have-nots'; concern about how struggling communities will cope compared with stronger, better resourced – increasing inequalities
- Encouraging people to do things at a smaller level but will it tackle the difficult issues like drugs, mental health?
- The community owning priorities and delivering services
- It requires time and money to build capacity in third sector – but organisations are losing funding
- Volunteering can be devalued if people are 'required' to volunteer to keep their benefits or as a 'community sentence' for crime
- Faith communities need to avoid being seen as colluding with the rhetoric – need to be prophetic
- Deprived communities have less capacity to play a full role in the Big Society
- Prefer 'Compassionate Communities' to the 'Big Society'
- Faith community can be the starting point in deprived communities
- Will the ultimate driver of the Big Society be social justice or 'outputs' (and efficiency savings)?
- Who will decide how Big Society is working – do faith communities have a role in monitoring & evaluation?
- May help to reduce emphasis on materialism in society

The Conversation continued after lunch:

Canon Stephen Taylor (Provost of Sunderland Minster) was keynote speaker for an interactive afternoon session in which Canon Caroline Dick from Sacriston, Bernadette Askins from the Key Project, and John Walker from Gentoo shared their experience of community leadership. Stephen introduced 5 key questions that clearly reflected a critical consideration of the 'Big Society' through the lens of faith: "***Who am I? Where am I? Who is my neighbour? Who is my friend? Who is my supporter?***" The last three elicited group responses such as:

Who is my neighbour?

- Defined by changing needs
- Anyone within our community, locality, "neighbourhood"
- Belong to multiple communities - interest, minorities, social media – not just locality
- Work colleagues, helpers
- Include those who are marginalised or at risk of being left out – e.g. travellers
- May not wish to engage with us

Who is my friend?

- Contributors to our well-being
- People who would miss us
- People with whom we can share trust, resources, risks
- May be people of other faiths; global as well as local
- Those with whom we share core values, common interest
- Those we enjoy being with and are comfortable with, spontaneity

Who is my supporter?

- Active helpers, work colleagues, professionals in allied organisations
- Those with whom we share common goals, who advocate for us and with us
- Friends and family, Faith groups, networks, groups with whom we link
- Elected representatives
- Those who provide financial support
- Be alert and prepared to make alliances with those to whom we are not naturally drawn: we may be surprised!

Acknowledgement and Thanks

The Chair thanked the Churches' Regional Commission organising group for their work and the various sponsoring bodies for making the event possible. He hoped that the key messages from the day would provide an appropriate agenda and starting point for subsequent conversations that would undoubtedly follow about the idea of the Big Society.

For further information, contact

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