

NOTES FROM MEMBERS' SESSION

APPLYING

BIG SOCIETY

IDEAS

London Cultural Improvement Programme (LCIP)
on behalf of London Councils

THESE NOTES

The following notes relate to the Community Engagement and Best Practice in Public Consultation conference held on 23 March 2011.

It is part of the London Cultural Improvement Programme, on behalf of London Councils. The Consultation Institute (TCI) was commissioned to design, deliver and manage the conference in addition to producing a number of guides and notes from the sessions. There are two Guides available to download: Stakeholder Management and Mapping; and Facilitation Skills.



The opinions expressed in these notes are those of the participants involved in this workshop and not of any particular organisation .



The Consultation Institute
www.consultationinstitute.org

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MASTER CLASS NOTES

Davy Jones led an afternoon Master Class on Applying Big Society Ideas at the London Cultural Conference.

At the end of session, participants surmised what they felt the Big Society may mean to them - [<click to READ>](#).

The attendees were made up of a mixture of officers and elected members. Davy began the session by garnering the thoughts of the group on the Big Society and what they would like to learn from the session.

In true Big Society fashion the responses were all very mixed. It was clear from the beginning that everyone agreed with the basic principles of the Big Society; encouraging participation, involving local people in local decisions, etc. But where delegates differed in their thoughts was the impact the Big Society would have on their own areas. One individual was concerned about how the Big Society would affect the cultural diversity in their borough and whether it would be of benefit to cultural diversity or a hindrance.

Other delegates wondered what the Big Society would mean Politically (capital 'P') and politically (little 'P') - was the BS really a transfer of power and would public engagement play a role in nurturing the transfer?

One of the elected members in the group felt that central government's view of local councils was very distorted in that they believe local communities are knocking at the door of the town hall *wanting* to manage their local services and that councillors are keeping the door shut. On both counts, the elected member expressed, "they were wrong." Councillors are already trying to encourage their communities to get involved but unfortunately there are few people that actually *want* to be involved.



Other delegates expressed their concern that the 'Big Society' is already in existence but was being lost by the huge cuts to funding and that 'Big Society' infrastructure was being lost too. Furthermore, it was argued by delegates that the principles of the Big Society are all well and good, but the practicalities of the Big Society will prove much more difficult to implement. For example, freeing up buildings and services and getting volunteers to run them could end up costing more time and resources than before. What some delegates are concerned about is seeing a 'race to the bottom' scenario develop as councils look to deliver services as cheaply as possible.

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One delegate raised a concern that the professionalisation of the voluntary sector which has occurred over the past 20 years could be seriously undermined by the government's proposals to muster an 'army of volunteers' to roll out the Big Society.

During its professionalization the voluntary sector has developed a good working relationship with the public sector, especially local government, and there is concern that the Big Society could damage this relationship.

After a very lively opening discussion Davy Jones moved through some of the prepared material. He looked at the [changing attitudes of the general public](#) about who is at fault for the current economic crisis that Britain is in. Delegates were surprised to know that in a MORI poll taken in February more people believed that the last Labour government were to blame rather than anyone else. In a similar poll taken six months ago the belief of the general public was that the bankers were to blame.

Discussions then moved to looking at how people today expect to be able to have the chance to have a say in how their taxes are spent. Whilst the majority of people will still

choose not to have a say they still want the facility to be able to so. However, it was argued by some delegates that there is often a mismatch between the wishes of the constituent and the reality of what councils can *actually* offer. Often this is due to a lack of information and education for communities, especially when it comes to local government budgets. For instance, most people will be unaware that up to half a council budget can often be spent on education and social services alone. It was concluded that the Big Society can only be implemented if communities understand the implications of budgets etc. The irony is that educating people about budgets is often difficult without spending money! Research shows that when people sit down in focus groups for a number of hours and consider the budgets in detail they are much more sympathetic towards the tough budget decisions which councils have to make. Making people 'budget literate' is essential.

The next topic of discussion focused on the rise of legal challenges, especially on the grounds of poor, or no, consultation. Examples have been seen in cases involving the closure of library services, reducing grants to charities, health, and more. It was stated by some delegates the Big Society will encourage more challenges as people become savvier with knowing the correct processes to making important decisions. This was deemed to be important to drive up standards in a society where authority and accountability could be scaled back.

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Volunteering provoked much discussion amongst the group. Davy showed the group a copy of the Cabinet Office Giving Green Paper (December 2010).

This paper proposes a change in the way people give both money and, more importantly to the group, time. On the whole it was felt that in 2011 Britain the amount of time that employed people have to give to volunteering is very little. The group discussed ideas around encouraging unemployed people to volunteer but one member of the group argued that looking for a paid job is full-time work in itself. Davy shared the report of how Lord Wei (the Government's Big Society tsar) found himself 'penniless' because of his work on the Big Society!

One of the major arguments against volunteering that arose from the group was that volunteering is a very unreliable method for running vital services. If people have no obligation to run a service then on a sunny day they might just decide to head to the beach instead of delivering meals to older people! The arguments regarding lack of infrastructure and the practicality of implementing the Big Society were once again referred to. This was a general concern for the group.

Finally, Davy briefly discussed the implications of the Localism Bill. He looked at some the public engagement aspects of the Bill including, the Community Rights to Buy and Challenge, Referendums and Planning. He discussed the opposition to the Bill which is mostly focused on the fact a bill intended to be about 'localism' contains over 100 extra powers for the Secretary of State.

Davy concluded the session by asking people to sum up in a sentence what they had taken from the discussions and these are listed below:

- Important to make more of what is already known - what community activities and engagement already takes place
- Work closer with other agencies/ organisations - multi-agency work is a vital component to the Big Society
- Encourage a culture change from asking people to get involved to people just wanting to be involved off their own backs. Also make people want to help others and not just themselves
- Accept culture is changing - embrace it and work with it - if we trust the PM then Big Society 'is here to stay'
- Be wary of the contradictions in the Localism Bill - not all about encouraging more involvement and devolving power!

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