

Summary of the Joint Scrutiny review of Big Society in Buckinghamshire.

National picture

There are many definitions of Big Society, but for the purposes of the review, the Bucks Task and Finish group used a quote from David Cameron:

“We know that the best ideas come from the ground up, not the top down. We know that when you give people and communities more power over their lives, more power to come together and work together to make life better, great things happen.” Extract from speech by David Cameron, 16 July 2010)

The Coalition’s vision for the Big Society sees a change in the relationship between the citizen and the state, with a reduction in the role of the state and greater responsibilities for individuals and communities.

The Coalition has launched a host of initiatives and policy approaches to support the Big Society; the key one being the Localism Bill (its intention is to give communities “reserve rights” to buy local assets, the right to challenge, and greater powers over planning matters). The Coalition is also establishing a Big Society bank to provide loans to voluntary groups to help them start up.

The Big Society agenda has faced criticism from both the national press and voluntary sector representatives who feel it is really about public sector budget cuts, rather than giving more responsibility to individuals and communities.

The scrutiny review group

This review was a joint scrutiny review between the 4 Buckinghamshire District Councils and the County Council, led and chaired by Wycombe District Council.

The Task and Finish group did not see the Big Society as a replacement or substitute for high quality council services, but rather as a different way of ensuring that communities have access to the services and opportunities that they need. The review focused on how councillors, councils and partners can support the development of the Big Society in Buckinghamshire.

The Task and Finish group heard from various community initiated projects, Community Impact Bucks, Clare Foundation, Buckinghamshire Community Foundation, Southwark Circle by Participle, and Burnham Health Promotion Trust, and received written evidence from County and District Councils, Parish Councils and Action4Youth.

The Purpose of the review

The Big Society Agenda (both nationally and locally) is being seen as an opportunity for Buckinghamshire councils to redefine their relationships with residents to empower individuals and communities, rather than residents relying on central and local governments for answers to the problems they face. By undertaking this review, members were able to contribute to the development of a shared understanding and vision across all councils in Buckinghamshire of what the Big Society should mean in Buckinghamshire.

Recommendations:

The table below shows the recommendations from the Bucks Task and Finish group (put forward as a result of carrying out the review into Big Society in Buckinghamshire) as well as the responses from both Buckinghamshire County Council (BCC) and Chiltern District Council (AVDC)

	<u>Recommendation</u>	<u>BCC response</u>	<u>CDC Response</u>
1	The County and District Councils in Buckinghamshire and the Bucks Strategic Partnership provide a written progress report on the implementation of recommendations after six months and one year on. This progress report will be published and considered by the Joint Chairman's Network.	Agreed	Any reporting on the implementation of the recommendations should be undertaken annually to the BSP via the district led Local Strategic Partnership so that control of public services is as close to people as possible.
2	All Buckinghamshire councils agree to support a joint County and District member development conference, with a Big Society theme, to develop councillor awareness and skills of their role in the Big Society. This should be an event held in Autumn 2011 and jointly owned by County and Districts, and should therefore be overseen by a joint member working group. We suggest that the County Council takes the lead in co-ordinating this event, with each district having a role to play in its organisation.	<p>Agreed</p> <p>This proposal was discussed in the initial meeting (between appropriate cabinet members of the Buckinghamshire Councils) for recommendation 4 below.</p> <p>Although it needs to be explored further, the initial response from district councils was that there were some reservations about the value of the proposal, and that they preferred a more district based approach.</p>	<p>The conference should act as an opportunity for Members, officers, partner organisations and the voluntary community sector to reflect on the current range of activities that are being delivered in Buckinghamshire in support of the Big Society and explore how the Open Public Services agenda can be developed in Buckinghamshire.</p> <p>In line with the spirit of the Big Society the conference should be led by the voluntary community sector or a District Council.</p>
3	All Buckinghamshire Councils agree to establish a joint member development working group. This group would ensure that a development programme is in place which (a) helps councillors fulfil their pivotal role in Big Society and (b) delivers value for money and is of common benefit to Buckinghamshire councils.	BCC supports this and will enter into discussions with the district councils once they have considered their response to the recommendations.	<p>Big Society is best delivered at a local level with local councillors (county, district, town and parish) supporting their own communities in delivering services e.g. supporting the community appraisal, youth club, or voluntary car scheme etc or even joining together to challenge a national rail project.</p> <p>In this respect, CDC has concerns over both the costs and what benefits will be achieved from a Member development working group.</p> <p>If any group is to be established this should</p>

			be a joint portfolio holder group. CDC would seek assurance on the terms of reference of the group to ensure that the control of services reflects the ambition of Big Society.
4	Buckinghamshire councils should consider innovative ways in which to maximise the impact of their funding to support communities. This should include investigating options for financially supporting the set up of not-for-profit organisations, for example, sustainable community-led trusts.	<p>BCC has made a founding contribution of £75K to the Bucks Big Society Bank (managed by Bucks Community Foundation). This will support the development of new sustainable business models in the VCSE. Work is also being undertaken to develop a support package to accompany loan finance (such as coaching and mentoring) to help develop sustainable social enterprises.</p> <p>BCC has created a Big Society budget of £250k p.a. to support BCC priorities in building community capacity and demonstrably building community spirit.</p> <p>The county council Cabinet Member for Community Engagement has already met with the 4 district councils to explore how this recommendation can be taken forward collaboratively.</p>	<p>CDC is currently using innovative ways in supporting the development if the Big Society in Chiltern and has a Big Society Plan identifying how it will support the VCS.</p> <p>CDC currently actively supports the establishment of community led organisations that are well placed to access funding or deliver services.</p> <p>Sustainable community led trusts (as exemplified by the Burnham Health Trust) are just one example of how communities can access external funding and deliver projects.</p> <p>CDC works with a wide range of partners including community associations, leisure providers, youth organisations and revitalisation groups to maximise the opportunities to access external funding. This has enabled £1m/yr to be invested in the local community, a position we should build on.</p> <p>CDC needs to continue to work with a diverse range of partners to maximise community benefits so that the delivery of services is undertaken at a local level as close to the people as possible.</p>
5	All Buckinghamshire councils review their own employee volunteering policies in light of the Big Society. Each should ensure that the policy benefits the organisation, through providing development opportunities to	BCC is developing is volunteering policy to promote volunteering opportunities to support the strategic Big Society objectives of BCC and partners.	CDC recognises the value of volunteers to both the VCS and the Council alike; it supports a wide range of individuals volunteering for civic duties such as the governorship of schools, special

	<p>enhance staff skills, and maximises the use of staff skills that the Voluntary and Community Sector needs—such as finance, business planning, contract management. Each council should also ensure that it promotes the take-up of volunteering opportunities.</p>	<p>BCC will work closely on taking this forward with Community Impact Bucks (CIB), possibly through the Expert Volunteer Programme.</p>	<p>constabulary, and Territorial Reserves, staff are also encouraged to volunteer within the community in which they reside and several are youth leaders or volunteering for the Olympics.</p> <p>Employee volunteering schemes can also assist employee development and have benefit for the wider community. However, in the current economic environment when employees are being asked to be more productive, CDC may not be able to support paid leave for volunteering. It will however pass this recommendation to the Personnel Committee for its consideration.</p>
6	<p>Buckinghamshire councils should work together to ensure that information and guidance is available to community groups to help set up and deliver services, including investigating the development of toolkits and a single online portal to signpost people to the variety of information and guidance available to support the Big Society in Buckinghamshire.</p>	<p>This is already being developed through the BSP Knowing Bucks and CIB websites. BCC and district councils already fund the VCSE Infrastructure contract; this recommendation can be made an explicit part of that contract from April 2012.</p>	<p>The provision of an effective voluntary sector resource, hosted by a voluntary infrastructure organisation, should be the appropriate repository of the information, guidance, toolkits and support for individuals and communities to develop the Big Society.</p> <p>The Voluntary Infrastructure Contract with Community Impact Bucks has already demonstrated effective use of resources with the £250,000 investment by the councils being supplemented by a further £1m in external funding.</p> <p>This has enabled new and innovative services to be delivered in support of the voluntary sector, helping the community to maintain high levels of volunteering and service delivery.</p>
7	<p>Buckinghamshire County Council leads on establishing a circle model (which offers help and support to its members to meet their</p>	<p>Business cases for the Circle of Support model (being developed in partnership with the PCT) and other initiatives are currently</p>	<p>CDC believes that the circle model of community support already exists within Chiltern through the network of voluntary</p>

<p>practical and social needs) in Buckinghamshire, in partnership with the health sector.</p>	<p>being developed.</p> <p>Decision on whether to proceed with the Circle of Support model and allocation of resources is anticipated later in the autumn. Subject to this decision, it is anticipated that the establishment of the Circle will be later in 2012.</p>	<p>and community organisations.</p> <p>This network enables individuals to connect; take notice of what's going on in their community; help individuals to remain active; learn new skills and give back to the community in which they live.</p> <p>Examples of this delivery are evident through the network of originations and volunteer groups supporting community appraisal process, older people action groups, the Chesham Building Community Capacity project and organisations such as University of the Third Age.</p> <p>The University of the Third Age alone operates two branches in Chiltern, with a membership of over 1700 people engaging in 118 different activities. The groups enable individuals to learn new skills, socialise, and remain active in their community. Many have taken this opportunity to volunteer for charitable organisations or support the governance of voluntary groups.</p> <p>By supporting a wide range of different initiatives, opportunities are created to enable people to engage in the activities of choice. In the past year alone, volunteers in Chesham have established the Food Bank, a faith forum, South East Asian Ladies group, emergency volunteering network and are exploring the development of a credit union adding to other community initiatives such as Silver Surfers, an integration project. All through minimal support and assistance by CDC, but by officers placing and supporting the opportunities for the</p>
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			<p>activity to occur.</p> <p>The benefits arising from this community capacity building has delivered support with practical tasks, increased social interaction, reduced cost through the provision of self help and voluntary sector support, increased choice over individual lives, and support with people living independently in their own homes.</p> <p>Through supporting community activity in this manner the cost to CDC is estimated to be £30,000pa. The majority of funding however has been obtained from external sources.</p> <p>Should 'circles of support' be developed, these need to be undertaken in partnership with both the district and town/parish councils, taking into account the local circumstances and not a one size fits all approach.</p> <p>It is clear that circles should link to the existing activity in the community and grow and develop from a strong base rather than seek to replicate or duplicate activity.</p>
8	<p>The District Councils, in partnership with Buckinghamshire County Council, should ensure that when new developments (the built environment) are planned, that area development policies include a requirement for developer contributions to be made to the provision of community facilities where a need is identified. For very large sites developers should provide such facilities on site, where</p>	<p>District councils to lead on this response.</p>	<p>This recommendation is not considered relevant to CDC, as due to the constraints of the Green Belt and AONB, very few large sites are available for development and developer contributions are required to deliver higher priorities such as Affordable Housing. As such, this proposal would represent a major change in the Core Strategy. It is noted that the</p>

	appropriate.		recommendation may have more relevance in other districts where larger developments may be possible.
9	<p>Bucks Strategic Partnership, as part of its coordinating role in the Big Society, should consider the following issues to ensure a common approach where appropriate and desirable:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) that the collective impact on the voluntary and community sector of Big Society initiatives and policy is understood b) responses to the forthcoming Localism Act are developed c) a shared understanding is developed of the impact of community development/ capacity building approaches d) a shared approach to measuring the social return on investment is developed 	<p>The Bucks Strategic Partnership (BSP) agreed the recommendation and expects the VCSE to lead on recommendations 9a and 9c.</p> <p>CADEX will lead on 9b.</p> <p>BSPIG is discussing an appropriate Buckinghamshire model for measuring the social return on investment and will take the lead on reporting against this.</p>	<p>CDC considers that the development of the Big Society should be a bottom-up approach arising from communities, individuals, voluntary and community organisations rather than the leadership coming from the Bucks Strategic Partnership.</p> <p>The BSP is best placed to support cross county matters that can assist in the delivery of the Big Society at a local level, and should develop policies that enable local innovation and delivery.</p>
10	<p>Bucks Strategic Partnership should coordinate the collation of information on community needs, based on communities' own identification of their needs, making use of existing mechanisms, such as community plans and appraisals. This information should be made publicly accessible and inform partners' decisions that impact on local communities.</p>	<p>Accepted by BSP, but with the reservation that this is on the basis of exploring options for doing so, and by making the best use of existing resources.</p>	<p>CDC considers that the district Local Strategic Partnership supported by the voluntary sector infrastructure organisation should be the coordinator of the community appraisal and community led planning information.</p> <p>CDC considers that the district Local Strategic Partnership should seek the support of each of its members to support the delivery of the identified priorities in the local plans.</p>

			Progress on the delivery against these priorities can be reported to the BSP on an annual basis.
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Next Steps:

The County Council, District Councils and partners will be taking forward the recommendations as agreed in the table above. We would welcome comments from LAF members, submitted through the LAF, on the implementation of the agreed recommendations, and ways in which Town or Parish Councils may wish to be involved.