

## The voluntary sector is at the centre of the government's Big Society plans. This may offer the possibility of better services, but not necessarily cheaper ones.

Blog Admin

*One of the core aims of the government's big society programme is to devolve power and the provision of public services to groups of citizens and voluntary groups. [David Lewis](#) finds that more support and capacity building for the voluntary sector is needed if it is to be able to contribute to big society plans.*



Every time the 'big society' idea is [re-launched](#) by the government (is this the third, or the fourth time?), we are reminded of a basic ideological contradiction at its core. This contradiction makes it difficult to send out a clear policy message and to secure public support for the idea. One strand is the [localism](#) project that seeks to place more power in the hands of organised groups of local citizens, who can take over key resources from government. This is part of the vision of compassionate conservatism, embodied in the ideas of Philip Blond and other thinkers, and in the ideas of free school activists such as Toby Young. It has a communitarian slant.

Credit: David Lewis

The other strand of the big society project is a more pragmatic set of responses to the opportunities provided by the budget deficit to drive through a swingeing programme of cuts, and to implement a new set of managerialist partnerships, contracting relationships, marketization and an imposed 'choice agenda' in the form of personalisation. Some have called this the 'bid society' rather than the 'big society', where there is as much emphasis on bringing in private for-profit companies as there is on not-for-profit citizen action.

Some critics argue that these are simply two sides of the same policy programme. But there is a growing contradiction. For many in the world of voluntary and community organisations (who oppose the marketeer approach), the big society idea finally offers the promise of conclusively validating their deep-rooted belief in the intrinsic value of their sector to society – as a diverse, bottom up set of organisations and networks with authentic community-centred values and powers at its heart and strong capacities for social innovation at its core. But much of what has been learned since the sector became a recognised area of social policy research twenty or so years ago is that the voluntary/community/third sector needs a support system and capacity building if it is to rise above well-meaning but amateurish activism, or piece-meal responses to large scale problems. Experience suggests that the voluntary sector may well offer the possibility of better services, but not necessarily cheaper ones.



So there is a fork in the road ahead. Some people in the sector argue that the damage already being done to the range, diversity and quality of sector support or 'infrastructure' organisations now taking place in the UK will seriously weaken their capacity, at the expense of the decentralisation and localism that many activists would otherwise broadly welcome. Others who support what is happening take the view that a

measure of 'de-professionalisation' in the sector, forced by the lack of resources, may actually be a blessing in disguise, since it forces a voluntary sector that has become too formalised and bloated (the unprecedented golden age experienced during the post-1997 New Labour era) to return to its voluntarist, informal roots. For this second group, a reduction of the third sector's dependence on government is a good thing. More reliance on volunteers brings more autonomy and freedom of decision making, and creates activist, caring values that can challenge the dominant culture of managerialism.

The current policy debates in many ways reflect a longstanding universal third sector tension – between the top-down funder-driven agenda of government and other donors, and the bottom up logic of people wanting to organise and work with people.

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*Also see: [New 'big society' providers could deliver better local services, but there are grave concerns surrounding funding, accountability and citizen redress](#), by Jane Tinkler and Paul Rainford.*