The Big Society: helping communities take action

In pursuit of 'reform, renewal, fairness and change' the Coalition Government is seeking to build the 'Big Society'. How can we enable local action on economic, social and environmental issues? And does research from the Rural Economy and Land Use programme offer any lessons for those at the sharp end in building the Big Society: individual activists, elected councillors, and local authorities?

**Policy and Practice notes
for local government**

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The aim of the Big Society, according to a speech from the Prime Minister, is '*to give citizens, communities and local government the power and information they need to come together, solve the problems they face and build the Britain they want*'. 'Localise', 'engage', 'empower', 'collaborate' and 'co-deliver' are among the watch-words of the moment. Research from across the Rural Economy and Land Use Programme makes a timely contribution to this agenda and builds on what we already know about what makes community engagement successful.

What policy framework is needed to encourage local action?

The Government's legislation on Decentralisation and Localism aims to devolve greater powers to councils and neighbourhoods, and give local communities control over housing and planning decisions.

The 'Rural Coalition' – influential rural stakeholders – have highlighted the importance of this kind of empowerment in creating the Big Society.

The Rural Coalition recommended that:

— National and local government should recognise and adopt community-led planning as best practice and part of putting in place the mechanisms to underpin the Big Society.
— The Government should build local capacity for delivery – for example, through support for local enablers and activists, advice and training, and modest funding opportunities.
— Parish and town councils should become the guardians of the community-led plan, monitoring progress and regularly adapting priorities to changing circumstances.
— Local authorities should recognise that there will often be a very strong case for individual communities obtaining visible benefits, community facilities and community-led services from accepting more development in their area.

How can communities become engaged in local action?

Plenty of guidance is already available to help people work together to tackle local concerns.

For example, the Local Government Information Unit has recently promoted four principles for local leadership. These focus on environmental projects but could also be applied to economic and social concerns.

Forge new and innovative partnerships that deliver outcomes, including:
— A shared natural vision – agreeing on targets and responsibilities.
— Opportunities for natural communities – incorporating the views of the communities in all partnerships.
— New, sustainable natural capital.
— Strategic support to lower tier authorities and community and voluntary bodies.

Take a green infrastructure approach to the Sustainable Community Strategy and Local Development Framework, based on:
— Identifying and enlisting the support of councillors.
— Building the value of the natural environment into decision-making
— Working with the community to develop a long term vision to ensure credibility and public support.

Give communities power to make decisions on the natural environment. Councillors can support them by:
— Getting communities involved at an early stage.
— Working with local organisations and voluntary groups to reach a wider audience.
— Not just consulting communities but guiding and supporting them to deliver projects.
— Making use of local knowledge and experience.

Attract investment by:
— Identifying projects where collaboration could lead to more efficient use of resources.
— Providing clear Section 106 guidance on opportunities to invest in the natural environment, and talking to designers and developers early to identify what actions they can take.
— Designing resources or projects to make the most of non-financial assets.
— Using small amounts of council funding or guidance to leverage other funds.
— Promoting ecological solutions as efficient and cost-effective means of tackling a range of problems.

What are the benefits of local action?

Relu projects have documented the benefits of working closely with local people.

Communities benefit because they:
— Begin to own the challenges they face, rather than simply expecting others to solve them.
— Key groups (e.g. land managers) are encouraged to act as a community, rather than as individuals, in taking action to meet agreed goals.
— Gaps between interests may be bridged by improved communication, understanding of different viewpoints, engagement and negotiation.

This approach can realise more value from human and natural assets:
— Getting the right scale of planning and management for any specific actions (e.g. at field, farm, catchment or landscape scale).
— Extracting more value for society from any one area of land and delivering multi-functional land management.
— Creating a more equitable relationship among the various interests, by establishing a common database of shared knowledge and understanding.
— Gaining valuable local information and inputs to models, scenarios and plans, as well as feedback on these, to provide a well-rounded view of the issues.

Projects built on these principles may be more likely to succeed because they:
— Draw on and integrate different types of expertise (e.g. local, professional and scientific).
— Identify and co-create a wider range of well-rounded, practical and realistic options for local action than could ever have been developed by any one professional or interest group alone.
— Avoid perverse effects and unintended outcomes by better understanding the complex motivations of different interests and their inter-relationships.

Benefits may turn out to be more long-term because such action can:
— Change perceptions, values and behaviours for the better, resulting in effective self-regulation and positive voluntary action, in the wider interests of society.
— Speed local delivery of practical actions by securing involvement, and building ownership, commitment, and motivation.
— Help people to realise that they can take action to improve their local environment.

What can Relu projects tell us about promoting local action?

Many Relu projects, particularly those focused on managing land and water, have tackled local challenges, drawing actively on the ideas, knowledge and experience of local people. The projects have built significantly on established approaches for engagement. They go beyond 'consultation' or 'participation' by putting the emphasis on 'deliberation', 'co-creation', and 'learn' not 'tell'.

Relu experience has distilled some critical good practices for each stage of local action:

Success depends on good planning:

—Target specific local issues at an appropriate scale (e.g. neighbourhood, parish/community, catchment, or landscape).

—Engage people from the outset, when challenges are first being aired, not after research, analysis and action plans have already been finalised.

—Bring together the key players (e.g. land managers, local interests and public bodies) in the target area.

—Use social research techniques to identify and involve apparent outsiders who may also be able to help.

—Be clear about the specific objectives for involving people (e.g. to gather data to inform understanding and models, and/or to build momentum for collaborative actions).

When engaging local people:

—Seek to understand and share the perspectives, priorities and motivations of the different interests.

—Combine, and encourage respect for different types of expertise, including scientific data and models and local knowledge and ideas.

—Use face-to-face meetings, field workshops and discussions to develop trust and share information.

—Ask independent skilled mediators or facilitators to lead engagement, if necessary, to help promote common understanding and defuse any conflicts.

—Create an agreed understanding of problems, opportunities and constraints, using Geographical Information Systems, informed by local contributions, to aid discussion.

—Get people to co-create and deliberate on models of 'what happens now' and on scenarios for the future.

—Develop proposals adapted to local conditions, and use innovative approaches, rather than blueprints.

Resources and time will be essential:

—Continue communicating to keep people informed and validate desired actions, and to negotiate change (e.g. in how specific areas of land are managed).

—Seek to secure and tailor any available funding to deliver the required local actions.

—Ensure shared and open access to data to help everyone understand the issues, and to measure impacts and monitor success.

—Continue with active engagement over time, with regular reviews and adaptation to take account of new information.

—Recognise that it often takes a considerable length of time to build the trust and understanding needed for successful collaborative working.

What is the 'Big Society'?

— 'We need to create communities with oomph – neighbourhoods who are in charge of their own destiny, who feel if they club together and get involved they can shape the world around them.'

— 'We must push power away from central government to local government – and we shouldn't stop there. We should drive it down even further… to communities, to neighbourhoods and individuals.'

— 'This process is all about learning. It's about pushing power down and seeing what happens. It's about unearthing the problems as they come up on the ground and seeing how we can get round them.'

— 'If you've got an idea to make life better, if you want to improve your local area, don't just think about it – tell us what you want to do and we will try and give you the tools to make this happen.'

Prime Minister David Cameron, 19 July 2010

What are the opportunities for local enablers?

Opportunities to encourage local action include:

— Promoting development of on-farm anaerobic digestion plants: These treat farm and/or food waste, yielding methane, used to generate heat and power, and a solid digestate, used as a fertiliser and soil conditioner. The scale of the plants (e.g. handling less than 30,000 tonnes of waste a year) appears to be important in winning local support.

— Finding solutions to reduce the risk and impacts of flooding: Several local initiatives have promoted debate about alternative solutions to tackling flooding from surface water or rivers, and pilot projects are testing alternatives to expensive capital investments.

— Safeguarding bathing waters from diffuse pollution: New European standards for protecting bathing water are likely to require concerted action to tackle diffuse sources of pollution (e.g. from livestock waste, and private septic tanks) in coastal river catchments.

— Promoting local food initiatives: Initiatives in several towns are involving businesses, schools, farmers and the community in increasing the amount of food available for local consumption, through the creation of community allotments and other initiatives.

— Developing a Transition Initiative: Many communities are working through the Transition network to develop their own responses to the pressures of climate change, fossil fuel depletion and economic contraction. These are providing the basis for a host of coordinated initiatives in areas as diverse as food, transport, energy and education.

— Undertaking water cycle studies: These studies, often led by local authorities, assess the impact of proposed development on all aspects of the water environment (resources, quality, supply, treatment capacity, discharges, flood risk, and surface water runoff). The studies collate existing information, highlight gaps, and consider how to achieve sustainable development.

— Protecting and restoring rivers: Initiatives, including those led by river restoration trusts, and organisations such as RiverCare, are actively engaging local communities in monitoring, managing and enhancing rivers, particularly in towns. They provide excellent examples of what can be achieved by developing clear objectives, working with local interests, and drawing on the immense energy, local knowledge and skills of volunteers.

— Improving the water environment: Local authorities are well-placed to support work to take forward the Water Framework Directive. Given appropriate resources, they can engage local communities, stimulate and support local initiatives, plan and integrate actions by the public, private and voluntary sectors, influence priorities and targeting, and generally join up implementation. Some lead local flood authorities are already considering widening the scope of their local flood risk partnerships to embrace a wider range of water management issues.

Further information