

## **Big Society, Localism and the impact on rural communities – Chairman's speech to Yorkshire Rural Support Network**

**Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> September 2011**

- Good morning. It's great to have this opportunity to be with you today, and to talk to you about the Big Society and Localism and the impact on rural communities.
- As Chairman of the Commission for Rural Communities I conduct frequent visits to rural communities, meeting and hearing the concerns of local people and those who represent them, and promoting awareness of rural needs amongst decision makers across and beyond Government.
- The CRC was set up with 3 key roles: first as a rural advocate, second as an expert adviser, and third as an independent watchdog to government.
- Last year Defra's Secretary of State announced that CRC was to be abolished and that Defra's internal rural policy capacity was to be expanded to create a Rural Communities Policy Unit (RCPU). The first stage of this transition was completed by the end of March this year, with a significant reduction in staffing levels and the scale of our operation.
- Since then, CRC's statutory functions have been carried out by myself and my fellow Commissioners, supported by a very small team.
- And in the time we have remaining, we are determined to continue our work in providing an independent voice for rural communities across government and beyond.
- And this includes our work on the Big Society and Localism.
- Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that the Big Society and Localism are two separate, but interconnected things. Localism is essentially about Government taking actions to devolve power away from Whitehall. Whereas the Big Society is about strengthening community power and activity.

- I think it is fair to say that the Big Society as a term has been much debated and contested.
- Part of the reason for this is that its proponents insist that it is not a traditional programme with a process and targets and a budget.
- Rather that it is “an approach”.
- The Prime Minister said last year that:

*“The Big Society is about a huge culture change where people, in their everyday lives...feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities.”*

- He has also talked about defining the Big Society as a way of letting local people take more control, where they want to, of what happens in their communities. Rather than being merely recipients of state planning and services.
- He also considers the Big Society as a way of tackling isolation and of harnessing the potential of groups working together, helping people to become more involved in improving the places where they live, without undue interference from the state.
- So the Big Society is an approach to give more power to local people and local communities.
- However, there are still plenty of initiatives coming out of Whitehall with a Big Society badge. Or if not with an explicit Big Society badge, that will certainly impact on the Big Society approach.
- These include: - **highlight a few of the below**
  - Supporting the creation and expansion of mutuals, co-operatives, charities and social enterprises, and enabling these groups to have much greater involvement in the running of public services;
  - Giving public sector workers a new right to form employee-owned co-operatives and bid to take over the services they deliver;
  - Training a new generation of community organisers and supporting the creation of neighbourhood groups across the UK, especially in the most deprived areas;
  - Introducing a National Citizen Service;

- Using funds from dormant bank accounts to establish a Big Society Bank, which will provide new finance for neighbourhood groups, charities, social enterprises and other non-governmental bodies; and
  - Ensuring that the Civil Service supports communities around the country.
  - And indeed, many of you will have heard that the Government has been working directly with a number of Vanguard areas around the country, focussed on removing obstacles to the Big Society. And these include small towns / rural communities in Windsor and Maidenhead and in the Upper Eden Valley in Cumbria.
- And what of the linked but also separate agenda of Localism? And how does this relate to the Big Society?
  - The government has stated that: *“Localism is the principle, the mantra, and defines everything we do.”*
  - In essence, Localism is about Government taking action to devolve power away from Whitehall.
  - But it is also clear that Localism is not just about giving power back to local government. It is also about pushing power downwards and outwards to the community level.
  - And this is where it meets and becomes part of the Big Society approach.
  - Again the government is introducing a range of specific actions and initiatives to facilitate Localism, many via the Localism Bill, and many of which interlink to, and have a Big Society feel. These include:
    - The ‘Community Right to Buy’ assets which they believe are important to the community, and the right to challenge a local authority by expressing an interest in running a service;
    - A requirement that some of the ‘Community Infrastructure Levy’ should be spent locally;
    - The introduction of a New Homes Bonus;
    - The formation of Local Enterprise Partnerships, which were designed to take on some of the functions of the RDAs.
    - And of course the much debated reforms the government is hoping to make to the planning system. These are based around the replacement of regional planning strategies and targets with

a more locally focussed approach, whereby 'Local Plans' drawn up and agreed by local authorities will be the key strategic planning documents for local areas.

- The Localism Bill also outlines provisions for the introduction 'Neighbourhood Plans', and smaller scale 'Community Right to Build', drawn up by local people, and ultimately approved in a referendum. These plans will be judged against the new NPPF, and will contribute to the make-up of Local Plans drawn up by the local authority, as well as having regard to and complying with the strategic policies contained in the Local Plan.
- It would be wrong to talk about the Big Society and Localism without touching on the current financial climate.
- We're now in a world of massive budget reductions. Issues about access to resources and arguments over resource allocation are now a mainstay in public life. More decisions are being devolved to cash-strapped local authorities, but with fewer targets and less ring-fencing.
- Supporters say that the Big Society may or may not save the Government money. But that that is not the point. The point is that local people in local communities can often do a better job than the traditional state in looking after their communities.
- But, whilst money may not be the point it is certainly an extremely important point. And this includes funding for voluntary sector organisations in rural areas.
- And the Government has made it clear that local government has a responsibility not to make easy spending cuts to the voluntary sector. But of course the challenges are obvious for all to see.
- And so what about the impact that Localism and the Big Society can and are having on rural communities?
- It is obvious to me that the principles and rhetoric surrounding the Big Society fit rural communities like a glove.
- The concept of Big Society is not new in rural areas. Indeed, one of the themes we drew out in our State of the Countryside report last year was the evidence that rural people are in a strong position to respond positively to this agenda.

- The Big Society vision is particularly viable within rural areas, where the building blocks of the Big Society are already deeply embedded within the experience of its communities. One of the challenges in developing community-based approaches is that they require a strong sense of what the community is. This sense is already strongly felt in many rural communities.
  
- Not only are rural areas typically equipped with an in-built sense of communal identity, but many rural communities have experience of leveraging this for social gain. Rural areas have long had to grapple with the particular challenge of their population sparsity. This has inhibited the opportunity for economies of scale and raised the cost of delivering services to meet their various needs. As a consequence, rural communities have a history of filling some of the resulting gaps through their own efforts. This has meant:
  - There are higher numbers of voluntary organisations per head of population in rural as compared to urban England.
  - There are higher rates of civic engagement in rural England (with 54% of rural residents participating socially, attending events or helping out) as compared to urban England (where 45% of urban residents participate).
  - There are an estimated £3 billion plus worth of community assets in rural England (particularly village and community halls and churches and chapels), including over 10,000 village halls in rural England, 90% of which are charities run by local volunteer trustees.
  - Over 4,000 community-led plans (e.g. Parish Plans and Market Town action plans) have been completed over the last few years in rural England. About half of the actions identified in these plans have been funded and delivered by communities themselves, without the need for external assistance.
  
- Rural communities have always pulled together when times are tough, but part of this pulling together has been because there is a clear service gap. Often during my visits to rural communities I hear the stories, the real life evidence, for example of local people providing an informal transport/ taxi service for pensioners to get to the hospital because there is no direct or convenient bus service. Or the village shop keeper operating a book loan service because the library is too far away to be accessible. The reality is that rural communities have managed to plug service gaps for a long time.

- And some of the government's Big Society ideas provide rural communities with the opportunity to take ownership of some of their solutions and to play a more formal part in delivering services. So, those providing informal transport to local people could join forces with their neighbours to offer a formal, contractual service with the local hospital / health service to transport elderly patients to GP's surgeries. The shop keeper could make space for an out-reach or mobile library service.
- It is clear that many local authorities are relying upon the 'community' sector to help "shore up" services and to deliver creative and cheaper solutions for them. Some councils have already taken steps towards this. Can rural communities step up to the mark, join forces and deliver services? I think the evidence shows that they can and already are.
- The reward will ultimately be to get recognition for that service delivery, working in a formal partnership with their local authority, and taking credit for delivery of a much needed service.
- The CRC has long championed a more equitable solution to providing rural services, and has highlighted the importance that public resource allocations between different places are fair, so that, for universal services, all citizens receive a broadly similar level. We have also highlighted importance that targeted services, for example to disadvantaged people, reach those targeted people and groups wherever they live.
- However, there are concerns that the notion of universal service provision is being eroded by the cuts to public budgets. It is important that the Government ensures that the Localism and Big Society agendas provide the sufficient safeguards necessary to protect and maintain service provision, particularly for vulnerable people.
- These fears may play out disproportionately in rural areas due to the additional costs of delivering services. For example, we have already seen huge cuts to bus and youth services across rural England. In addition, the increasing trend towards personalised budgets for services such as adult social care, and the delivery of this through private and voluntary sector contractors, may create additional problems for people relying on these services, as there is likely to be

less choice between providers in rural areas due to the higher cost of delivering such services.

- This attaches an even greater importance to the need for local people and organisations to take responsibility for coming up with creative and innovative solutions to meeting these challenges. There are wonderful examples of how this works in practice, and the impacts that for example a successfully run community shop or community centre can have on the lives of the local community. In the past these solutions have been on a limited scale, working in partnership with existing service provision and often with support from the Local Authority.
- But with the pressing need to cut public sector budgets, the harsh reality of the current economic climate is that now, more than ever, we need to be creative and innovative to plug the gaps in service provision and to manage and maintain those gaps over the next few years, as budget cuts to front line services take their toll. The challenge for the community groups and social enterprises who are stepping in to plug these gaps is how to remain viable and sustainable once public funding is removed and the number of volunteers within a community is exhausted.
- But no matter what your personal views on the Big Society and Localism, they undoubtedly represent an opportunity to seize on and enhance the hugely positive work that is already taking place across many rural communities in England.
- Thank you.