

The Rural Big Society



Contents

Summary of recommendations	2
Introduction	4
The Rural Big Society in action.....	1
Challenges	3
Ideas and suggestions	5
Building and strengthening the asset base of local rural communities.....	5
Strengthening rural social capital	6
Promoting and sustaining locally based social enterprise.....	8
Devolving greater control to local rural communities (including parish & town councils and including neighbourhood planning)	10
Conclusion.....	11
Annex	12

Summary of recommendations

We believe that rural communities could and should be a great test bed for the further development of the Government's Big Society approach. In order to make this a happen, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Government should ensure that the Asset Transfer Unit is provided with the resources to support rural communities with the capacity and expertise they require to realise their ambitions for community asset ownership and management.
2. Continued work should be put into developing rural peer-to-peer learning networks, drawing on the experience and views of similar networks within other parts of the UK.
3. Communities and Local Government (CLG), Defra and the Office for Civil Society should engage the Church of England and the other churches with significant assets in rural England to explore how these assets can better be used to secure Big Society objectives.
4. A high percentage of the resources raised in rural areas should be managed and invested by local parish and town councils.
5. The funding redirected from the Revenue Support Grant to fund the work of Local Government Improvement and Development should also be used to help support the development and skills needs of the parish sector.
6. The Department for Work and Pensions, with its lead policy responsibility for older people across Government, should work with local government to champion the role and potential of the Village Agents approach to advice, support and social capital-building.
7. The Department of Energy and Climate Change and Defra should work with relevant others, including ACRE and the Plunkett Foundation, to develop models of community-based energy provision appropriate to rural communities.
8. The Rural Coalition should develop clear best practice in developing rural access to Next Generation Broadband. They should also provide technical and other guidance to their members.

9. The Big Lottery Fund should seek to sustain the benefits of the Village SOS learning campaign can be sustained in the longer term.
10. Defra should work with the Big Lottery Fund and the Independent Trust to ensure that the objectives of the Big Local Trust programme reach fairly and deeply into rural England.
11. Cabinet Office and Defra should publish good practice guidance for rural procurement, for use across national and local government.
12. Given the higher social costs that can fall on villages and towns arising from new development, consideration should be given to rural communities, in particular at a Parish level, receiving a higher direct percentage of the proceeds from new sources of funds, such as the New Homes Bonus and Community Infrastructure Levy.
13. CLG should work quickly with relevant partners (including with the Rural Coalition) to develop and publish credible and locally worked through guidance on how neighbourhood level plans will work in practice.
14. CLG, the LGA, NALC, the Society of Local Council Clerks and the Association of Electoral Administrators should prioritise the development of proposals to reduce the burden of the costs of parish and town democracy on local taxpayers - without reducing the quality of the democratic process.
15. Make Local Spending Reports, under the provision of the Sustainable Communities Act, more relevant to people in their local neighbourhoods
16. New local GP consortia should make periodic (at least annual) reports to the villages and towns that they serve, perhaps via the local parish or town council.

Introduction

Over the last five years the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) has worked hard to champion and to help rural communities: as an advocate and voice for rural communities; as expert adviser to Government and others; and as an independent watchdog, monitoring and reporting on the delivery of policies.

In particular, the CRC's work has sought to celebrate and promote rural communities and rural economies, their vitality and also their potential. The Government's Big Society vision therefore resonates strongly with the CRC's experience of and ambitions for rural society.

The CRC has been working with ResPublica to explore the value of the Big Society in rural societies. During this project the CRC and ResPublica worked with a number of rural organisations (listed in the annex). This included a roundtable meeting on 17 December 2010 with representatives of many of these organisations to explore the challenges and potential offered by the Big Society.

This paper is not intended to be definitive. Nor is it intended to be comprehensive. For example, it does not address the potential Big Society agendas relating to the environment within rural places, notably relating to land, water and other natural resource management. It is intended to help central and local government and others as they seek collectively to deliver the rural Big Society.

Crispin Moor
Commission for Rural Communities

Matt Leach
ResPublica

The Rural Big Society in action

In his Hugo Young Lecture in 2009, the Prime Minister defined the Big Society as:

“A huge culture change, where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplace, don’t always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities.”

This 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.¹ 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 most rural communities.

Not only are rural areas typically equipped with an in-built sense of communal identity, but many rural communities have experience 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.

- There are also around 9,000 parish and town councils in (mostly rural) England representing some 15 million citizens. They are served by 80,000 plus volunteer elected councillors. These neighbourhood level councils do not generally exist in urban England, although local action is beginning to address this in some cities.

There are many examples of good practice to draw on, demonstrating the nature and strength of the Big Society approach in rural England. Future work by the CRC will highlight some illustrative examples. Rural communities are at the forefront of many of the most credible case studies of the Big Society in action. And many rural communities are amongst those best placed to take the Big Society approach to the next level.

Challenges

Rural communities face a number of specific challenges as they seek to deepen their Big Society approach. These include:ⁱⁱ

A rapidly aging population

As outlined in State of the Countryside 2010,ⁱⁱⁱ given that the rural population continues to age faster than in urban areas, this will have consequences for the delivery of goods and services, especially in relation to housing and healthcare. An ageing population will place increasing demands on government and society, meaning that, even if overall levels of government spending are maintained, spending in many policy areas will need to be significantly constrained. These are likely to be particularly acute in many rural areas. However, it will also provide new opportunities for community-based solutions that promote association and cooperation providing increased capacity for community engagement harnessing the time and experience of an older community base.^{iv}

Reductions in state spending

Civil Society organisations and local authorities serving rural communities currently face the challenge of adjusting to significant reductions in state funding. This could lead to adverse impacts on the services they provide for often vulnerable people and communities^v. For example through fewer, because costlier, referrals and outreach services for dispersed rural communities due to the lack of easy economies of scale in serving these places.

‘Cream skimming’

Commissioning and contracting processes may allow ‘cream skimming’; where targets are met from concentrating resources and services on urban centres. It is encouraging to hear Nick Hurd saying:

“I am very, very conscious that ...we’ve got to fundamentally reform commissioning and procurement and how the state buys” and also that “We want commissioners to consider more than just cash cost, but also other values, social and environmental values, when making purchase decisions.”^{vi}

Infrastructure

Increasing the connections between people and communities, which lies at the heart of the Big Society approach, requires both transport and high speed broadband, both of which are challenges within and between our rural communities. This includes the carbon footprint of transport and also the availability and costs of transport, and of broadband. The experience of the Cumbria Big Society vanguard area will be instructive in this regard.

The impact of community assets

The structures, funding and trends of community assets can be different in rural England to elsewhere. Recent trends of post office, shop and pub closures in rural England have posed significant challenges to their communities (sometimes successfully addressed).^{vii}

Complexity and cost of local governance

Much of rural England is served by different and more complex structures of local government. These include two tiers of principal local authorities, National Park Authorities in many areas and also an extensive tier of parish and town councils, providing a significant governance overhead for local communities.

Ideas and suggestions

Over the course of this project, we and our partners have identified a number of ideas and suggestions. These are not intended to be a shopping list of proposals. However, they provide a starting point in efforts to maximise the potential of the rural Big Society. As it prepares to wind up its operations, the CRC would be happy to discuss some or any of these with Government departments and with others if that would be helpful.

Building and strengthening the asset base of local rural communities

The asset base of community meeting spaces within many rural communities is considerable. This goes beyond village halls to include church buildings, scout huts and similar and also pubs and clubs. If the Big Society is to be achieved, it is vital that these assets are working together as effectively as they can, to meet the needs of rural communities.

The Localism Bill, currently going through Parliament, offers the opportunity to transform the asset base of many rural communities – through a series of potentially transformative new community rights, such as the:

Community right to bid

Every town, village or neighbourhood is home to buildings or businesses that play a vital role in local life. They might include meeting rooms, swimming pools, village shops, markets or pubs. Local life would not be the same without them, and if they are closed or sold into private use, it can be a real loss to the community ... Proposals in the Localism Bill will require local authorities to maintain a list of assets of community value. Communities will have the opportunity to nominate for possible inclusion the assets that are most important to them. When listed assets come up for sale or change of ownership, community groups will have time to develop a bid and raise the money to buy the asset when it comes on the open market. This will help local communities keep much-loved sites in public use and part of local life.^{viii}

However, to make best use of that potential, communities will need access to support and advice.

The Asset Transfer Unit, funded by CLG, advises and supports communities seeking to own and manage assets for community benefit. There are distinctive features

around community owned assets and their viability in rural areas, from village halls to the natural environment such as woods, forests, nature reserves and the shoreline. As rural communities seek to benefit from the Localism Bill's provisions, **it will be critical to ensure that the Asset Transfer Unit is provided with the resources to support rural communities with the capacity and expertise they require to realise their ambitions.**

Practical peer-to-peer learning has real potential as a means of enabling support to be provided mutually, between the managers of rural assets. Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE), which hosts the national Village Halls Advisory Service, has already pioneered this approach, working in partnership with the Rural Community Building Network (including ACRE and hosted by the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). **Continued work should be put into developing rural peer-to-peer learning networks, drawing on the experience and views of similar networks within other parts of the UK.**^{ix}

Church assets often sit at the heart of rural communities.^x However, they represent a massively under-utilised resource. **Communities and Local Government (CLG), Defra and the Office for Civil Society should engage the Church of England and the other churches with significant assets in rural England to explore how these assets can better be used to secure Big Society objectives.**

Strengthening rural social capital

The strength of rural communities' social infrastructure is often remarked upon.^{xi} Both Government and communities will wish to build on this strong foundation as they build the Big Society.

Since 1894, Parish Councils have provided the single largest body of grassroots local activists and opinion formers, now democratically representing over 15 million citizens mostly in rural England. Their collective turnover is some £500 million annually, all raised and spent locally. This is a miniscule fraction of overall local authority spending, which is estimated in the region of £113 billion per annum.

The Localism Bill currently before Parliament should represent something of a new constitutional settlement in recognition for the essential place of parish and town councils in our system of local democracy.^{xii} Plans for a Community Right to Build and a Community Right to Challenge place parish and town councils centre stage in our local democratic system. But change won't happen by itself. Current Government proposals for new sources of local funding through a New Homes Bonus and a Community Infrastructure Levy will only realise their localist ambitions if these new resources are allocated transparently for the benefit of the communities directly affected. **This can easily be achieved by ensuring that a high percentage of the resources raised in rural areas are managed and invested by local parish and town councils.**

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) with its partners, including the CRC, the Local Government Association (LGA) and CLG, has recently published a new National Training Strategy for the parish sector.^{xiii} Implementation of this strategy will lead to the delivery of high quality training to parish councillors and officers and enable a stronger contribution by this sector to the aims of the Big Society.

Central government is not directly supporting the delivery of this strategy. However, CLG has made clear its expectation^{xiv} that the funding it top slices from the Revenue Support Grant to fund the work of Local Government Improvement and Development^{xv} should also be used to help support the development and skills needs of the parish sector. **We endorse this as a priority and look forward to Local Government Improvement and Development, working with the NALC and the LGA, publically reporting on their progress.**

Village Agents^{xvi} have offered real value as source of advice, support and social capital in many rural communities.^{xvii} These schemes deliver face-to-face support and advice on services to isolated elderly people living within parts of rural England. They offer the potential for significant cost savings through their preventative approach to public service provision, which helps deliver the right local services to people in need before their needs become acute (and more expensive). However, in some areas their position may be under threat because of current and future pressures on Local Authority and other budgets. **The Department for Work and Pensions, with its lead policy responsibility for older people across Government, should work with local government to champion the role and potential of the Village Agents approach.**

Promoting and sustaining locally based social enterprise

There are many examples of successful social enterprises within rural England. Organisations such as the Plunkett Foundation and ACRE do a commendable job in advising and supporting these enterprises.

We particularly note the potential of community-based energy enterprises for raising resources to be used for local community benefit. More can be done to support and encourage the development of successful enterprises of this sort. **The Department of Energy and Climate Change and Defra should work with relevant others, including ACRE and the Plunkett Foundation, to develop models of community-based energy provision appropriate to rural communities.**

Similarly, we note that community enterprise solutions to the lack of rural access to Next Generation Broadband are being planned and delivered in several rural communities, including in the Cumbria Big Society Vanguard Area. We know that these efforts are being applauded and supported by Government - for example, via Broadband Delivery UK and Defra. **We urge the Rural Coalition^{xviii} to be clear in their dealings with central and local government and with their members as to what they see as best practice in developing rural access to Next Generation Broadband. They should also provide technical and other guidance to their members.**

The valuable experience that the Big Lottery Fund, and other lottery distributors, have in investing in rural communities for long term local benefits should both be applauded and used. For example, the Big Lottery Fund's Village SOS programme is developing a learning campaign as an integral part of the programme. **We urge the Big Lottery Fund to think about how the short term value of the Village SOS learning campaign can be sustained in the longer term.** This could provide a powerful exemplar for use in similar circumstances in the future.

The Big Lottery Fund's ambitious Big Local Trust^{xix} is investing up to £200 million over the next ten years in 100 – 150 urban and rural neighbourhoods that have been overlooked for funding. The funding will be deployed by an independent charitable Trust. It is good to see that a number of rural communities have been included within the first 50 areas chosen for investment. These resources will help local people make their communities better places to live, and will help them to develop the skills and confidence they need to identify priorities that matter to them and to take action to change things for the better. **Defra should work with the Big Lottery Fund and the Independent Trust to ensure that the objectives of the Big Local Trust programme reach fairly and deeply into rural England.**

The Government's focus on securing greater value, including social value, from public procurement and commissioning in future raises questions and suggestions from a rural perspective. We suggest, based on some existing good practice, that

there are useful technical ways in which procurement and commissioning can happen in which the particular circumstances and challenges of delivering to dispersed communities and client groups such as those found in many rural areas can be recognised and addressed. **Cabinet Office and Defra should publish good practice guidance for rural procurement, for use across national and local government.**

Devolving greater control to local rural communities (including parish & town councils and including neighbourhood planning)

As outlined above, it is important that village and town communities receive significant local benefits from the proposed New Homes Bonus and Community Infrastructure Levy. **We urge CLG to explicitly clarify that this is their position.**

There will also be value in highlighting and sharing the first few examples of how these resources are being spent for local community benefit. This will help other communities see the balance between new development and local community benefit which may help mitigate any local downside to new developments. **Given the higher social costs that can fall on villages and towns arising from new development, consideration should be given to rural communities, in particular at a Parish level, receiving a higher direct percentage of the proceeds from these new sources of taxation.**

The Government's proposals to introduce a local mechanism to generate and adopt neighbourhood level plans to shape future development are welcome. We think that there is more that needs to be done to show local communities, as well as principal Local Authorities, how such local parish or town land use plans might be delivered and might work in practice for local community benefit. The experience of both Parish Plans and Market Town Plans can usefully be drawn on here. The new and strong focus on neighbourhood level power and influence over local land use planning matters needs to be exemplified so that local people can think whether they want to go down this route or not. **CLG should work quickly with relevant partners (including with the Rural Coalition) to develop and publish credible and locally worked through guidance on how neighbourhood level plans will work in practice.**

The costs of local democracy at the parish and town council level have long been a source of disquiet.^{xx} For example, there is anecdotal evidence that contested parish and town council by-elections are frowned upon locally because of the significant and unbudgeted burden they often impose on local taxpayers. The CRC and the NALC have just published a good practice paper on managing the costs of parish level democracy.^{xxi} **We feel that parish democracy is an area where, with some further and possibly more radical thinking, there is scope for significant reforms and savings.** This also applies to the costs that will be incurred by local authorities of parish- and town- level local referendums of one sort or another. It will be important that the democratic objectives of such referendums are not undermined by the levels of cost that they impose on local taxpayers. **CLG, the LGA, NALC, the Society of Local Council Clerks and the Association of Electoral Administrators should prioritise the development of proposals to reduce the**

burden of the costs of democracy on local taxpayers - without reducing the quality of the democratic process.

The Government has a strong commitment to the greater transparency of local spending data. But spending data at the level of the principal local authority geography will not always be relevant to local people in the context of the villages and towns that they live in. Spending data at this more local level can help local people understand and begin to influence the way that public expenditure happens in their communities. **We urge CLG to consider how Local Spending Reports, under the provision of the Sustainable Communities Act, can be made more relevant to people in their local neighbourhoods.** We also hope that the 'Your Local Budget' pilots being delivered via the Big Society Network, NESTA and other partners will try and look at budgets at this very local level. It will be interesting to see what progress in this area is made by Dulverton Town Council and by the Herefordshire Association of Local Councils and by the local authorities in Norfolk.

Finally, the Government's plans for commissioning by local GP consortia in the National Health Service raise some questions about local accountability. Clearly, this is a matter that goes beyond rural communities because it affects all communities. **We see no reason in principle why local GP consortia should not make periodic (at least annual) reports to the villages and towns that they serve, perhaps via the local parish or town council.**

Conclusion

We believe that rural communities could and should be a great test bed for the further development of the Government's Big Society approach.

We hope that the ideas and suggestions arising from the engagement exercise commissioned by the CRC and set out within this paper will of use to the Government and also to local authorities and other actors at the local level.

Annex

Individuals from several organisations have contributed ideas and views on this project, including attending our roundtable event on 17 December 2010, under Chatham House rules. Whilst the content of this final report is our responsibility, we are grateful to everyone who has contributed.

The organisations who have contributed in this way include:

- Action with Communities in Rural England www.acre.org.uk
- Action with Market Towns www.towns.org.uk
- Churches Rural Resource Unit at the Arthur Rank Centre
www.arthurrankcentre.org.uk
- Big Lottery Fund www.biglotteryfund.org.uk
- Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs www.defra.gov.uk
- National Association of Local Councils www.nalc.gov.uk
- Rural Bureau Network, Citizens Advice www.citizensadvice.org.uk
- Rural Innovation www.ruralinnovation.co.uk

Cover image supplied by John Beverley under the Creative Commons license. License terms are at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/>

ⁱ The information in the following section is drawn from the CRC's State of the Countryside 2010: <http://ruralcommunities.gov.uk/sotc2010/>; ACRE's Implementing the Big Society (2010): <http://www.acre.org.uk/DOCUMENTS/publications/Policypositionpapers/Bigsociety.pdf> ; and 'It takes all sorts – Local councils: represent your community, make a difference' (National Association of Local Councils 2009): http://www.nalc.gov.uk/Publications/Booklets_and_Resources.aspx

ⁱⁱ Some of these challenges and risks are drawn from over 70 submissions from rural organisations that the CRC analysed to prepare its Rural Economies Intelligence Report: economic conditions for organisations contributing to the Big Society in rural England (October 2010): <http://ruralcommunities.gov.uk/2010/10/15/big-society-risks-and-opportunities/>

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} See Matt Leach "8 New Policy Principles for the Big Society" ResPublica 2010. Available at: <http://www.respublica.org.uk/blog/2010/12/8-new-policy-principles-big-society>

^v Although the Prime Minister has made it clear that local government has a responsibility not to make easy spending cuts to the voluntary sector: "...we should say to every single council in the country, 'When it comes to looking at and trimming your budgets, don't do the easy thing, which is to cut money to the voluntary bodies and organisations working in our communities. Look at your core costs. Look at how you can do more for less. Look at the value for money you get from working with the voluntary sector ...and everyone should try to work in that direction.'" (PMQs 15 September 2010)

^{vi} Nick Hurd speaking in Sheffield, November 2010.

^{vii} For example the Plunkett Foundation estimate that of the 254 community-owned village shops that have opened over the past 25 years, only 8 have ever closed. This means that a staggering 97% of community-owned shops that have opened are still open. Due to the level of commitment this business model is able to unlock from their communities, community-owned village shops are able to draw on over one million hours of volunteer time per year. See: <http://www.plunkett.co.uk/newsandmedia/news-item.cfm/newsid/458>

^{viii} DCLG (2011) *A plain English guide to the Localism Bill*. Available at: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1818597.pdf>

^{ix} See, for example, the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations and their work with village halls: <http://microsites.scvo.org.uk/villagehalls/Home/Home.aspx>

^x The Church of England alone owns (in all places) some 16,200 church buildings and 43 cathedrals as well as land and other assets. See: <http://www.churchofengland.org/about-us/our-buildings.aspx>

^{xi} For example see CRC's State of the Countryside 2010 section 2.8 on Community Strength using data from the DCLG's Place Survey 2008: see: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/placesurvey2008>

^{xii} As outlined, for example, by Decentralisation Minister Greg Clark at the All Party Parliamentary Local Democracy Group on 24 January 2011. James Morris, MP also argued last year that it was vital to use existing structures to drive the change the government wants, and not to “throw the baby out with the bathwater and invent a series of new structures. We should be looking at local councils to be the vital platform to build the roots of localist change.” (See: <http://www.rsnonline.org.uk/Politics/Time-has-come-for-local-councils.html>)

^{xiii} See: http://www.nalc.gov.uk/Latest_News/Latest_News.aspx

^{xiv} See: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1795289.pdf>

^{xv} See: <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pagelid=1>

^{xvi} One of the leading examples of a Village Agents scheme is in Gloucestershire. See: <https://www.villageagents.org.uk/index.asp>

^{xvii} An Audit Commission commentary on the Gloucestershire Village Agents is also available. See: <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/localgov/goodpractice/kyc/examples/Pages/gloucestershire.aspx>

^{xviii} The Rural Coalition is made up of organisations which represent rural interests: ACRE, Action for Market Towns, Arthur Rank Centre, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Country Land & Business Association, LGA, NALC, the National Housing Federation, the National Farmers Union, the Plunkett Foundation, the Rural Services Network, the Royal Town Planning Institute and the Town & Country Planning Association. See: <http://www.acre.org.uk/news/acre-news-releases/2011-news-releases/ACRE+version+17+Jan+11+Rural+Coalition+Press+Release>

^{xix} See: http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/prog_biglocaltrust

^{xx} For example see the CRC’s report ‘Participation inquiry: strengthening the role of local councillors’ (2008): <http://ruralcommunities.gov.uk/strengthening-the-role-of-local-councillors/>

^{xxi} See: http://www.nalc.gov.uk/Publications/Booklets_and_Resources.aspx