

Strategy & Partnership Scrutiny Committee

17th March 2011

The Big Society Framework

Purpose

This paper sets out Oxfordshire County Council's activity to support the creation of a Big Society in Oxfordshire. It has been discussed by CCMT and Informal Cabinet. Scrutiny members are asked for their views on the framework. We are also now discussing the framework with our partners so it may be subject to further amendment

Background

1. Healthy and Thriving Communities has been a key objective for the County Council and its partners over recent years. This is a key strand of both Oxfordshire 2030 our Sustainable community strategy and the Council's Corporate Plan. In consequence we have been emphasising community self help activities in a variety of ways including the promotion of volunteering, support for community transport schemes etc
2. The unprecedented cuts in public expenditure have inevitably given added impetus to discussion about what local government can afford to fund and what activities might in future be delivered through the voluntary and community sector.
3. Increasingly we are an organisation that is focused on the commissioning and facilitating of outcomes with service delivery only needing to be retained in-house where there are economic or practical reasons.
4. Since the 2010 General Election the Coalition Government has been clear that 'Big Society' is a key element of their programme with four clear themes identified
 - **Devolution** – to local government but also direct to schools, parish councils and other local bodies. The government is also promoting co-operatives and not for profit organisations to take over the running of services.
 - **Cutting red tape/getting rid of bureaucracy** – this includes giving local government a power of general competence as well as scraping a range of quangos and statutory requirements (LAAs, CAA, National Indicator set etc)
 - **Encouraging community action** – volunteering, community organisers etc
 - **Transparency** – requiring public bodies to be open about their spending and giving local people the opportunity to challenge

5. Greg Clark the Local Government Minister has described three actions required for the Big Society to flourish:
 - the right to know - what the state can do for us
 - the right to challenge – What we can do for ourselves
 - turning Government on its head – what we can do for others”
6. The Local Government Bill and various sets of draft guidance define the potential legislative framework and we will bring further reports forward on the various strands of the Bill which include:
 - Internal governance issues for local government (general competence, referendum requirements, committee system, standards, right to challenge etc)
 - Housing provisions
 - Planning and regeneration provisions including Community Infrastructure Levy

Our Broad Approach to Big Society

7. We need to build on the work already in hand and the following proposals are recommended:

Devolution

8. Over recent years we have made a number of attempts to encourage town and parish councils to take on functions from the County Council. There has been little take up but the offer remains on the table. **The Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils should be encouraged to lead a debate with their members.**
9. We have developed shared services (e.g. ICT for the City Council) partnering arrangements (e.g. highways) and have contracted out numerous services (e.g. residential care). **We will continue to look for opportunities to join with others to improve value for money and service quality including proposals for co-operatives which might be promoted by the not for profit sector or employees.**
10. **In 2011/12 we will establish the Area Stewardship Fund for highway related ‘community enhancement projects’. It is anticipated that in each district area there will be an allocation of funds which Area Stewards will spend on local priorities.**

Cutting red tape and bureaucracy

11. Changes made by government (regional bodies, CAA, LAA, NIS etc) have enabled the County Council to slim down its workforce. **We will continue**

to reshape our management structure and back office functions to reflect the new operating environment

12. We have already identified 14 localities based on natural communities and started work on a series of locality reviews involving local members. Our aim is to help local members to ensure that our services are shaped to fit local communities and to avoid a one size fits all approach. **We will continue our locality focus and in particular address the potential for community run library and youth facilities.**
13. We are developing and improving our customer responsiveness. **During 2011 we will rethink our customer service strategy having particular regard to the findings from our locality reviews. We will also support members to get things done for their communities e.g. making it easy for communities to organise street parties to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee.**
14. The public are often discouraged from volunteering because of perceived obstacles some of which are imagined rather than real. **We will seek to 'bust the myths' and encourage local people to take responsibility for their area particularly in relation to snow clearance and clean and green issues.**

Encouraging Community Action

15. Oxfordshire has a strong and vibrant voluntary, community & faith sector (VCS) but there is potential to encourage more volunteering. **We will work with the VCS to further promote a volunteering culture and connect volunteers to appropriate outlets for their skills and energies.**
16. We already fund key voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations including OCVA and ORCC: these organisations are vital in supporting local groups, helping with advice on fund raising and volunteers and in providing a voice for the sector. **However in conjunction with our partners we will need to refresh our funding priorities in the year ahead.**
17. For 2011/12 we have established the Big Society Fund to help pump prime community self help projects. It is anticipated that this funding will be used to support projects which emerge from locality reviews and ideas being generated in our communities especially those relating to libraries, youth provision and community transport. However it is also likely that some of this funding will be needed to support the VCS sector to develop their own Big Society strategy and to support local organisations and groups to take on new challenges. **The Council will promote community projects and seek to support as many local projects as we can. More details are on the Council's Big Society website.**
18. The County Council's pump priming fund will not meet all of the funding needs which will emerge as we build the 'Big Society'. **So the Council will work with Oxfordshire Community foundation and other VCS**

infrastructure organisations to find new ways of raising funds to support our communities.

19. We are already working with the local government leadership centre to help develop county councillor community leadership/social entrepreneurial skills. **During 2011 we will work with the Leadership Centre to support members, in particular focusing on three of our locality reviews to support local members from all political groups.**
20. We have for many years supported community planning so that local people help shape the future for the communities in which they live and work. **Over the medium term we will strive to extend community planning across all towns and parishes and work with the City Council to promote and support neighbourhood planning**
21. We spend £59m with the VCS and independent sectors each year. Much of this spend is for services delivered on behalf of the County Council and this spending is administered under procurement and contracting arrangements. However we do spend almost £1m each year on grants to local organisations (supporting the arts, environmental groups, advice services etc). **The Council will during 2011 define clear priorities for its grant giving and work with partners to ensure we have a joined up approach which maximises value for money**
22. The County Council already has a 'volunteering policy' for staff and a recent survey revealed that more than 40% of staff volunteer in their spare time. **There is scope to encourage even greater levels of staff volunteering and in the year ahead we will explore how we might better support staff volunteers.**

Conclusions

23. We start from a solid baseline of strong communities and extensive volunteering, but there is much more to be done to unpick the reliance on the state and reshape the County Council for 21st century needs. In Oxfordshire this represents evolution rather than revolution but the steps identified in this report will be difficult and challenging.

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