

Connected Communities

Preparing a baseline from which to measure 'Big Society'

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Background

Executive Summary

Big Society is a core element of the coalition government's policy and ideology. In essence, a Big Society is one in which citizens and communities take a vastly increased role in managing, shaping and delivering public services and the social and physical infrastructure of society. This project produced a 'blueprint' for measuring variation in capacity for, and participation in, Big Society. The measure would be for communities across the entire UK.

Our measure distinguished three 'domains' of influence over the development of Big Society: *Individuals, Community and Regulatory Environment*. We identified datasets that could characterise: attitudes to, and participation in, Big Society; existing infrastructure which might support its development; and the extent to which local resources and regulatory environments are supportive. We found many datasets which could contribute to the measure, but also that government had discontinued some of the most pertinent sources. We then set out a means of combining available data into a classification which would characterise different communities according to their capacity for and participation in Big Society.

We consulted with interested parties, including government, to create our blueprint. Once it was complete, we set out our ideas in a short animated film.

www.measuringbigsociety.org

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"You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment. You can call it freedom. You can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society"

Prime Minister David Cameron

19th July 2010

Big Society is a core element of the Coalition government's policy and ideology. It is not easy to define, but in essence a Big Society is one in which citizens and communities take a vastly increased role in managing, shaping and delivering their local public services and the corresponding social and physical infrastructure. Our team was funded under the AHRC-led Connected Communities programme. Our project aim was to produce a 'blueprint' for measuring capacity for, and participation in, Big Society. The measure would be for small areas across the entire UK.

How was the research carried out?

The project ran from 1st January to 31st August 2011. Dr Liz Richardson was the main researcher on the project, with active inputs from all other investigators. The research proceeded as follows:

- established a working definition of Big Society and community
- developed a set of 'domains' through which the multiple attributes of Big Society, and its progress, might be captured
- sought data with which to measure each domain
- designed a means of summarising the domains
- consulted stakeholders on our plans

- developed an animated film which became a key component in our public dissemination plans.
- produced a report outlining our proposed solution
- drafted an academic paper

We now briefly explain our thinking and product.

What is Big Society?

A measure of Big Society requires a working definition. Much of the debate about its definition has occurred between politicians, bloggers, think-tanks and the media. There is a degree of tension, bitterness and disagreement about the idea, yet perhaps general agreement that 'Big Society' is shorthand for the Coalition government's desire to shift responsibility and power from 'the state' to 'the people'. All else is hotly contested, including the motivations, mechanisms and potential impacts. Informed by literature, within team debate and conversations with key informants, we came to understand Big Society as a shift in the *Philosophy, Power and Practice* of public service delivery.

In terms of *Philosophy*, Big Society is a shift from "the idea that the role of the state is to direct society and micro-manage public services, to the idea that the role of the state is to strengthen society and make public services serve the people who use them" (Conservative manifesto 2010, page vii).

In terms of *Power*, Big Society is a decentralisation of power from central government and local government to 'the community' and 'the public'.

In terms of *Practice*, Big Society is intended to pass management and delivery of public services from the central and local state, to other organisations (including the third sector and private providers), communities and individuals.

Defining 'Community'

Much of the debate around Big Society refers to 'the community' and our project required a working definition of community too. We opted for a geographical definition which allowed communities to be non-overlapping and to be compared. People living in the same geographically defined area would be assumed to belong to the same community. We acknowledge that this has its weaknesses and strengths. We carefully reviewed options for defining communities in this way and selected Lower Layer Super Output Areas in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and Data Zones in Scotland. These small areas, used in the reporting of census data, have an average population of about 1400 people.

Structuring our measure of capacity for, and participation in, Big Society

We recognised a number of 'levels' of influence on the development of Big Society and labelled these 'Domains'. Within each over-arching domain, we identified a set of key measures (subdomains).

Domain 1 Individuals

At its core, a Big Society requires individuals to participate. The attitudes, motivations and behaviours of individuals will thus be a crucial influence on the uptake of Big Society and an important metric.

Domain 2 Community

However, individuals are situated within, and influenced by their wider communities. Characteristics of the local society, economy, infrastructure and population will influence capacity to participate in the Big Society. Communities with existing high quality infrastructure and high levels of participation in the Big Society would be places in which it may be easier for an individual to 'get involved', than those with no existing infrastructure or opportunities.

Domain 3 Regulatory Environment

In order to grow, the Big Society requires changes in the law, a supportive state, and a flow of both resources and responsibility from the state to the people. The UK has a complex administration; national and local governments have varying powers and of course, varying political perspectives. The capacity and willingness of local governments to help deliver Big Society will vary and is likely to influence levels and progress of Big Society activities.

Implicit in this structure was the idea that a community might be doing well on one or more domains, but not on others. We intended our measure to be sophisticated enough to recognise this and to perhaps to enable researchers to exploit it for analysis. It would, for example, enable researchers to ask whether strength or weakness in a particular domain was more important than strength or weakness in another.

Data and variables

We undertook an iterative approach to identifying which datasets and specific variables could be used to capture these domains, for all communities in the UK. Each potential dataset was assessed on five criteria to assess its suitability. First, the data should provide a relevant and reliable measure of the subdomain. Second, the data should be as up-to-date as possible. Third, they should be readily available for the whole UK. Fourth, the data should be able to capture differences between small-areas. Finally, the data should be routinely updated (or reproducible), so

that change over time could be monitored. The search used online databases, literature searching and consultation with key informants in the government and academic sectors.

From this search we were able to clarify 10 subdomain 'questions' with which to assess a community and for most of which, we could identify a suitable data source. The questions are shown in the figure below, which is also intended to communicate how the items fit together to measure each domain.

The datasets and items we identified to answer these questions are shown in the table on the following page.

DOMAIN 1: INDIVIDUALS

Subdomain 1a. Do individuals feel in control of what happens in their community?

Subdomain 1b. Are individuals motivated to participate for wider societal benefit?

DOMAIN 2: COMMUNITIES

Subdomain 2a. Is there a local third sector infrastructure that is Big Society-ready?

Subdomain 2b. To what extent are communities involved in local decision making?

Subdomain 2c. Does the community have the potential for increased involvement?

Subdomain 2d. Does the communications network facilitate local participation?

DOMAIN 3: REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT

Subdomain 3a. Does the regulatory environment facilitate TSO activities?

Subdomain 3b. Are decentralised powers being used fully?

Subdomain 3c. Are resources being allocated to building the Big Society?

Indicator	Dataset	Latest available*	Details			UK coverage?			
			Repeat planned?	Current frequency**	E	W	S	N	
DOMAIN 1 Individuals									
1a Do individuals feel in control of what happens in their community?	<i>% agreeing that they can influence decisions affecting their local area</i>	CS	2009/10	✗	n/a	✓	✓	✗	✗
		SHS	2007/08	✓	continual	✗	✗	✓	✗
1b Are individuals motivated to participate for wider societal benefit?	% agreement with four statements about the neighbourhood (re: belonging, friendships and willingness to work together to improve n'hood)	BHPS	2008	✓	5 years	✓	✓	✓	✓
DOMAIN 2 Communities									
2a Is there a local third sector infrastructure that is Big Society-ready?	Density of key volunteering opportunities	Advertised volunteering opportunities	2010	✓	continual	✓	✓	✓	✓
2b <i>To what extent are communities involved in local decision making?</i>	<i>% population that participated in a local decision-making group in past year.</i>	<i>Place Survey</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>✗</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>✓</i>	<i>✗</i>	<i>✗</i>	<i>✗</i>
2c: <i>Does the community have the potential for increased involvement</i>	<i>% population with 'volunteer potential'.</i>	CS	2008/9	✗	n/a	✓	✓	✗	✗
	% population with 'volunteer potential'	BHPS	2007	✓	biennial	✓	✓	✓	✓
2d Does the communications network facilitate local participation?	Estimated frequency of talking to neighbours	BHPS	2008	✓	annual	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Estimated use of internet for civic participation/local information	OIS	2009	✓	biennial	✓	✓	✓	✗
DOMAIN 3 Regulatory environment									
3a Does the regulatory environment facilitate TSO activities?	% TSOs rating the local statutory environment positively	NI7	2008	✓	biennial	✓	✗	✗	✗
3b <i>Are decentralised powers being used fully?</i>	<i>Potential: number of (successful) invocations of the right-to-challenge and right-to-buy powers</i>	<i>Not known</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>?</i>	<i>?</i>
3c Are resources being allocated to building the Big Society?	% council expenditure going to charities	openlylocal.com	2010	continual	continual	✓	✗	✗	✗
	% TSOs rating the local resource allocation positively	NSCSE	2008	✓	biennial	✓	✗	✗	✗

Cells in italics denote those for which the government has terminated the survey, or for which we were unable to identify a suitable source

Data sources: CS = Citizenship Survey; SHS = Scottish Household Survey; GHS = General Household Survey; BHPS = British Household Panel Survey; do-it.org.uk (England), *volunteering-wales.net*, *volunteerscotland.org.uk*, and *volunteernow.co.uk* (Northern Ireland); Place Survey; OIS = Oxford Internet Survey; NI7 = National Indicator 7; <http://openlylocal.com/councils/spending>; NSCSE = National Survey of Charities and Social Enterprises.

* at time of going to press ** Frequency of question being asked if less frequent than survey;

E, England; GB, Great Britain; LA, Local Authority; n/a, not applicable; NI, Northern Ireland OA, Output Area; S, Scotland; TSO, Third Sector Organisation; W, Wales.

Deriving an indicator from these data

We propose combing the data into a composite area-level indicator. The original nine indicators would also be available to complement this composite measure, and provide flexibility in data analysis and interpretation. We considered combining the variables into an index; a measure on a continuous scale. However, we believe that capacity for or participation in the Big Society is not a simple linear concept ranging from low to high. It could be important to differentiate, for example, between areas with a low level of empowerment but high volunteer potential, and those with high empowerment but low volunteer potential. These differences would be obscured if the measure was treated as additive. Instead, we propose a classification. It would group similar communities based on their subdomain scores, resulting in a range of profiles of Big Society capacity/activity. A two-step hierarchical clustering procedure would be used to achieve this classification.

Engagement, consultation and output

We shared and discussed our ideas with stakeholders throughout the project. Those consulted included Department for Communities and Local Government, the Big Society vanguard councils, the Big Society network, bodies with a remit to help voluntary organisations and volunteers (e.g., ACEVO, NCVO, volunteer centres, TimeBank), independent think tanks (e.g., nef), academics, the Cabinet Office and the civil service. It became clear that in addition to views on the technicalities of our proposal, we needed to

communicate our *raison d'être* more effectively. To this end, we commissioned a short animated film from thirty8 digital (www.thirty8.co.uk). The film was placed in a web-based survey environment (see www.measuringbigsociety.org), so that we could also attempt to capture viewers' perspectives on Big Society. This was our team's first experiment with new media and also with promotion via Twitter. The film was viewed more than 600 times.

We also wrote a report about our thinking and plans, and placed this on our team website and on the measuringbigsociety.org website. Finally, we have drafted an academic paper which explores both the technical and theoretical challenges to measuring Big Society and will submit this to Environment and Planning.

Key Findings and summary

The difficulty in defining Big Society was a recurrent theme in the project. Different stakeholders held different views as to what it is, and therefore what would be important to measure.

It would be possible to build a measure of capacity for, and participation in, some aspects of Big Society from existing secondary data sets. Such a measure might not satisfy all potential stakeholders, but it would provide information about the baseline position and subsequent development of what is intended to be a revolution in public service delivery.

There are significant gaps in the data available to measure capacity for, and participation in, Big Society. The measure proposed here would require some estimation of data. Some data gaps are a direct consequence of government cutting surveys about community participation. It is anomalous that

a government committed to cultivating a Big Society should simultaneously remove some of the best tools for assessing its success and impacts.

References and external links

www.measuringbigsociety.org

*[http://cresh.org.uk/cresh-themes/
methodology/Measuring%20Big%20Society/](http://cresh.org.uk/cresh-themes/methodology/Measuring%20Big%20Society/)*

*[http://cresh.org.uk/2011/04/12/measuring-the-
big-society-stakeholder-consultation/](http://cresh.org.uk/2011/04/12/measuring-the-big-society-stakeholder-consultation/)*



www.connectedcommunities.ac.uk