

Big Society - big questions

Public services are facing unprecedented reductions in the amount of funding they receive from the Government. The Government's solution is a completely new approach - the Big Society. Here, we outline what the Big Society could mean for County Council services, and ask you for your views.

Councils, the police, the fire service and the NHS are going to have to make significant changes to their services as Government funding is reduced to deal with the national budget deficit.

Even the excellent record of councils like Cambridgeshire in achieving efficiency savings will not be enough to close the budget gap we are likely to be facing.

Some services will inevitably reduce or end. But there are other, innovative approaches we can take to providing services, as well as continuing to be more efficient.

One approach is the 'Big Society' - essentially, this means communities providing services for themselves in their local area, instead of them being provided by councils and other public services.

It might mean that community groups, businesses and volunteers are involved in running everything from schools and libraries to transport and social care.

Ultimately, in the Big Society, services in some communities will depend on the level of public involvement. Local people will concentrate efforts on the services they value the most.

Big Society - big differences?

Big Society concepts mean that services will be run differently - and much more, through volunteers instead of salaried employees.

On the next page, we

outline two case studies, one based on the present day, and one based on a Big Society model, to illustrate how services might be run differently.

Meet the Joneses. The family have lived in a village close to one of the county's market towns for generations. Roger and Sarah Jones have recently taken early retirement.

Now

The Joneses live in a Band D Council Tax home, and pay just over £1,400 a year in Council Tax for council services. Roger and Sarah are both keen users of the library in their local town; they brought their daughter Tessa here regularly when she was growing up, and Tessa also went to the local Community College.

Their daughter Tessa works in Cambridge, and lives in the next village with her husband. They have just had their first child, and Tessa is on

maternity leave. She regularly attends the free Baby Rhyme Time sessions which run in the library.

Roger's mother Margaret also lives in the village. She is 80 and really values her independence. She lives alone in the house she (and Roger) grew up in. Whilst she's still very mobile, she does need help to do some of her chores and other tasks around the home. Roger and Sarah help out when they can.

She likes to go into town when she can, but can no longer drive. There is a local bus service, subsidised by the County Council, but it doesn't run very

often through their village. As such she's often reliant on Roger or Sarah to drive her.

There's a pub in the village, but there's not very much for younger people to do. Sarah's friend has recently set up a youth group in the village at the community centre, which is funded by the County Council. It's increasing in popularity, but there's a limited range of things that they can do. The club also relies on parents to take its members to activities outside the village, as well as the limited bus services which are subsidised by the County Council.



In the 'Big Society'

Roger and Sarah are both volunteer staff at the local library.

Roger helps with customer service. He works with library staff to help visitors to use the self-service system, and uses the catalogue to find the books and resources they need, referring to specialist staff for detailed information. Sarah worked in computers until she retired - she now volunteers with the Engage IT project at the library, helping the over-50s to learn how to use computers and the Internet.

The management of the library has also changed - it's run by a not-for-profit trust, and its IT systems are shared across neighbouring counties.

Tessa now volunteers to help run the Baby Rhyme Time at the library, a half hour session of song and rhymes for parents and babies one morning each week. She's met lots of new people and finds it really rewarding.

Margaret now receives some extra help in her own home provided by volunteers from within the village. This helps her cope without feeling like she's relying too much on Roger and Sarah, and she enjoys the company.

When Margaret goes into town, she uses the local community transport scheme, operated by volunteer drivers. The group receives financial support from the Council to run local transport services. They are more efficient than subsidised bus routes, which the Council stopped providing - and can also be more flexible, providing a much more

frequent service to smaller villages.

Community groups can also use the vehicles in the evening; Margaret's driver Dave also volunteers at the local youth group, which runs at the local community centre. The centre is now run and managed entirely by the community as a social enterprise. It relies on fees which small companies and local groups (like the youth group) pay to use the centre.

The youth group also makes regular use of the community transport minibus to take members to sports events or evening trips.

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We want to hear your views on the Big Society. Would you volunteer to give up your time to help run services in your community? What would encourage you to do so? Use the space below to tell us what you think. Then cut out and send in an envelope to our FREEPOST address below - you don't need a stamp.

Please provide the first line of your address and your postcode.

postcode:

Thank you for taking part. All responses will be treated in confidence. Any views provided will be used by Cambridgeshire County Council for research purposes. It may be published anonymously. Individual responses will not be passed on to any other organisation.

Send your responses to:

Big Society - Big Questions
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