THE BIG SOCIETY & THE ENVIRONMENT: BETTER TOGETHER

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Researchers in the Institute for Sustainability Solutions Research at Plymouth University interviewed 17 environmental leaders in the UK in the summer of 2011, including leaders in 15 environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) representing combined public memberships in excess of three million people.

The researchers concluded; firstly, that the Government needs to reassure environmental NGOs of its views on the role of government, internationally, nationally and locally, in protecting and enhancing the public good that is a quality natural environment.

Secondly, the Government needs to take on board environmental concerns about Localism: recognizing the potential for local communities to “free-ride” by failing to play their part in protecting environmental assets, that have benefits for society more generally; and taking steps to ensure that decisions taken locally respect the wider good.

Thirdly, the Government needs to be clearer on the circumstances under which not-for-profit organisations are better placed than government or the private sector to undertake functions that have previously been undertaken by the government or its agencies. It needs to explain how a transfer of function is better than a partnership whereby government departments, agencies, NGOs, private companies and individuals all work together.

Fourthly, the Government needs to provide adequate resources if it wants to encourage much higher levels of community participation, activism and volunteering. It cannot expect the voluntary sector to deliver this for free and evidence suggests that it will not achieve it by cutting red tape or enabling more charitable giving.

The researchers suggest that there is an urgent need for Government and civil society to come together and re-establish the conditions for synthesizing the best in the Big Society and ‘greenest government ever’ agendas; that this might formerly have been undertaken by an agency such as the Commission for Sustainable Development.

Now, in the spirit of cross party consensus and higher ideals, this synthesis should be facilitated by a task force of committed representatives of government, opposition, academia and civil society operating in an inclusive and transparent manner in service of what could be a significant opportunity to simultaneously enhance social inclusion, hope, quality of life and environmental protection.

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INTRODUCTION

On Sunday, 7th August, a protest in Tottenham over the shooting by police of a local man descended into a riot as shops were looted and cars and buildings set alight. Over the next few days copycat riots broke out in Hackney, Croydon, other parts of London and cities such as Birmingham and Manchester, as England suffered its worst urban civil unrest for thirty years.

This research was conceived, designed and carried out before the riots took place. Its premise was unconnected – to find out whether the Government’s Big Society initiative offered any opportunities or posed any threats to the UK’s environmental agenda, as perceived by opinion formers in the environmental NGO movement. However, its findings are relevant, especially if one believes that any response to social unrest must give hope and belief both to the affected communities and ultimately to those people feeling economically and socially marginalised in their urban environment.

What we found was both encouraging and frustrating. The 17 environmental leaders we spoke to were passionate enthusiasts for volunteering and community action in service of the natural environment. Many strongly believed that an inclusive society is fundamental to the achievement of sustainable development and a high quality environment- urban or rural. But, most were doubtful that what the Government is doing, under its Big Society banner, will lead to the inclusive and engaged civil society the Prime Minister apparently seeks, let alone help deliver additional more visionary environmental goals. There was a strong majority feeling that a potentially significant opportunity is being missed.

At the time of writing that opportunity may still be overlooked. The Prime Minister has blamed the riots on “criminality, pure and simple”. He has downplayed his Big Society agenda and has focussed instead on traditional responses such as the role of policing, welfare reform, teaching styles, the Human Rights Act and support for families.

We believe the Government could elect to do more. In the 1980s a previous government responded to inner city rioting with programmes to give hope to affected communities. These programmes included support for charities to engage young unemployed people in community work. Although criticised at the time, much lasting good came out of them – especially for local urban environments. They included support for recycling projects that built expertise to enable nationwide local authority recycling collections to work. They included bike routes that literally paved the way for the National Cycle Route Network. They included a host of local amenity improvements delivered by organisations such as Groundwork across England.

The social challenge in 2011 is comparable to that of the 1980s. The environmental challenge is different but, if anything, more pressing. We simply ask: what can the Big Society do for the environment and what can environmental Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) do for the Big Society?

This report is in three parts. First, we introduce the issues by recounting the development of the Government’s Big Society agenda. Second, we explain the research that was undertaken and summarise the responses. Third, we discuss these responses and develop conclusions and recommendations from them.
“The Big Society” is one of Prime Minister David Cameron’s most compelling ideas. It is important because it was one of the three main programmes featured in the Conservative Party’s 2010 manifesto. It was also used in the manifesto as a metaphor for the transformation that the Conservatives envisaged to be needed in British society. The ideas behind it have formed part of Mr Cameron’s discourse for a long time. It is his solution to what he perceives as Britain’s “broken society” and his alternative to what he calls the “big government” of the previous Labour administration. It was also his means of clearly demarcating his Premiership from that of his Conservative predecessor, Margaret Thatcher, who famously claimed that “there is no such thing as society”. So the concept is at the heart of what the Prime Minister believes and clearly goes well beyond symbolism or superficial branding. It is the essence of Mr Cameron’s project for the country.
ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

Although “the Big Society” was first mentioned by David Cameron as recently as 2009, the ideas behind it are much older, going back, some would argue to Edmund Burke. Certainly, the thinking behind it has been part of Mr Cameron’s language since before his election as the Conservative Party leader in 2005.

Even then, he expounded two core beliefs. The first was that “if you trust people, they will generally do the right thing”; that “the more power and responsibility people have over their own lives, the stronger they become, and the stronger society becomes”. The second was that “there is not a single challenge we face that isn’t best tackled by recognising the simple truth that we are all in this together”. “Too often”, in Mr Cameron’s view, “people look to government to simply ‘deliver’ solutions when it is quite clear that government is only one part of the solution. Individuals have the power – and therefore the responsibility – to make a difference as parents, as consumers, as citizens”.

In a series of speeches, following his election as leader, he reiterated these ideas – of trust in individuals and shared responsibility – again and again. At the same time, he extolled the benefits of voluntary action and of localism, transferring power from central government to local institutions.

Slowly through years of opposition, these ideas came together to form a coherent series of proposals. Mr Cameron’s first mention of the Big Society appears to have been in a lecture to honour the former Guardian journalist, Hugo Young, in 2009. In it, he argued that the British state was too big and, counter-intuitively, that its very bigness was “inhibiting, not advancing the progressive aims of reducing poverty, fighting inequality and increasing general well-being”. He claimed that the state was promoting selfishness and individualism rather than solidarity.

His alternative proposal, however, was not simply to reduce the size of the state. Simple retrenchment, he argued, was wrong: “Just because big government has undermined our society, it does not follow that retrenchment of the state will automatically trigger its revival”. Instead, he re-imagined a new role for the state. In a critical passage, he argued: “Because we believe that a strong society will solve our problems more effectively than big government has or ever will, we want the state to act as an instrument for helping to create a strong society.

Our alternative to big government is the big society. But we understand that the big society is not just going to spring to life on its own: we need strong and concerted government action to make it happen. We need to use the state to remake society.”

Then, he proceeded to lay out the components of what has since become his Big Society agenda.

Firstly, he re-stated his commitment to redistribute power and control from the central state and its agencies to individuals and local communities: “That way, we can create the opportunity for people to take responsibility”. Coupled with this, he argued was a need to ensure decentralisation was accompanied by greater transparency and accountability: “Through decentralisation, transparency and accountability we can give people power over the services they use, over the way their tax money is spent, over how their local area is run.”

Secondly, he committed the Conservatives to using “the state to stimulate social action”. This would involve transferring state funds to social entrepreneurs: “We will identify proven social programmes, franchise them to social entrepreneurs with a track record of success and fund them directly from existing state budgets to deliver public services”. It would involve supporting community activists: “We need more community activism, and more community activists. But again, it would be naïve to think this will happen quickly enough on its own. The state has an important role to play... People need help to start up even the smallest projects, get the information they need, understand the dynamics of social activism.”

“Our alternative to big government is the big society”
It would involve engaging the silent majority: “The big society also needs the engagement of that significant percentage of the population who have no record of getting involved – or a desire to do so. The big society demands mass engagement: a broad culture of responsibility, mutuality and obligation.” This included engaging young people through a National Citizenship Service. And it would involve changing the culture of Whitehall, turning civil servants into “civic servants”.

The Big Society agenda, as originally conceived was radical and ambitious. Mr Cameron saw it taking “more than a generation” to fulfil. In fact, it was so radical and so ambitious that few in the Conservative Party seem to have understood it, let alone wholeheartedly supported it.

Nevertheless, it had a significant place, as a metaphor and as one of three “programmes of reform” in the Conservative manifesto for the 2010 General Election. In the manifesto, the Conservatives restated much of the rhetoric that had been such a feature of Mr Cameron’s speeches for the previous five years and claimed that: “the Big Society runs consistently through our policy programme. Our plans to reform public services, mend our broken society, and rebuild trust in politics are all part of our Big Society agenda. These plans involve redistributing power from the state to society; from the centre to local communities, giving people the opportunity to take more control over their lives.”

Unsurprisingly, given its importance in the Conservatives’ manifesto, the Big Society also featured in the coalition programme agreed with the Liberal Democrats after the Election. It was mentioned in the Foreword by David Cameron and the Liberal Democrat Leader, Nick Clegg, and the Programme contained a whole section on “Social Action”, which included many of the ideas that had featured in the Conservatives’ manifesto as well as others borrowed from the Liberal Democrats. Thus the Big Society became the core of the intellectual compact between David Cameron and the Liberal Democrats for whom local social activism has long been a hallmark and arguably largely responsible for their renaissance as a political force in recent decades.

**PROGRESS IN GOVERNMENT**

Once elected, Mr Cameron quickly reaffirmed that his “great passion is building the Big Society” and set about implementing his programme. He set up the Office for Civil Society within the Cabinet Office to translate the vision into practical policies and asked Cabinet Office Minister, Frances Maude, to chair a Government Committee overseeing progress. He appointed Lord Nat Wei as his Big Society advisor.

However, progress since then has been mixed. On the plus side, the Government can point to a very impressive list of actions and some real achievements in three key domains of the programme:

- **Transferring power to communities**. The Government has published the Localism Bill which devolves power to local government and beyond and provides new rights for citizens and communities to take on functions currently undertaken by the State. This was given the Royal Assent on 15th November 2011.

- **Opening up public services**. The Government has published a Green Paper on changes to commissioning to make it easier for charities to provide services to the state as well as guidance for local councils on their dealings with the voluntary sector.
• **Encouraging social action.** The Government has published Green and White Papers on Giving and announced new incentives to encourage philanthropy. It has carried out a review of red tape that might adversely affect charities and set up funds for innovative projects to encourage giving. It has carried out pilots leading to the creation of a National Citizens Service, whereby young people will carry out voluntary projects and will roll this out to 30,000 participants next year and 90,000 the year after. It is supporting the training of community organisers in the most deprived communities. It is working with banks to create an institution that will use £400 million from dormant accounts to support social action.

But on the less positive side, the Government has failed to convince key constituencies of its vision or its plans. As a result, the Big Society agenda has been derided by critics and some now consider it a “toxic brand”. The reverse suffered over proposals to sell-off forests in England was perhaps emblematic of the failure of Government to enthuse conservation and other environmental constituencies with the opportunity on offer.

The Opposition, unsurprisingly, was quick to pour scorn on the idea of the Big Society. The Shadow Minister for the Cabinet Office, Tessa Jowell responded to the Government’s first announcement by claiming the plans were a “brass-necked rebranding of programmes already put in place” by the previous Labour Government and that civil society would be weaker as a result of Government cuts. The then Labour spokesperson on work and pensions, Yvette Cooper, was quick to highlight that cuts in Government funding meant that programmes to enable unemployed youngsters to volunteer were being withdrawn when the Government was still talking about setting up the National Citizens’ Service. These criticisms hit home and by January 2011, the Guardian reported that senior Conservative advisors were worried that cuts in funding to charities were undermining the Big Society before the Government’s programme had even got underway.

Sections of the Conservative Party were also sceptical. Some of the civic charities themselves, however, were positive. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations initially welcomed many of the Government’s proposals. However, this cautious support hid underlying concerns.

The Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) set up a Commission to examine the idea which reported in May 2011. This found that almost a third of voluntary sector chief executives and four-fifths of the public were unclear what the Big Society meant. It called for the Government to work in partnership with voluntary organisations, warned against excessive cuts and urged the Government to ensure a more coordinated implementation of the Big Society agenda across Whitehall. It raised concerns that some communities would be better placed than others to take advantage of the Government’s reforms and urged the Government to target its support to the most disadvantaged ones.
There is some evidence that the Government is listening to these concerns but it is quietly pressing ahead with the Big Society programme. The Big Society brand has been weakened and repeated attempts by Mr Cameron to relaunch it have been met with scepticism, but it seems to be too important to Mr Cameron to eliminate altogether. The August riots might have been seen as vindication for Mr Cameron’s agenda. They have sparked and will continue to fuel a lively political debate. But, although Mr Cameron has restated his narrative since the riots, he has changed it significantly. As noted above, he blamed the riots on “criminality pure and simple” and, although he reiterated his belief in “a broken society”, he explicitly rejected charges that poverty or his Government’s cuts were a factor behind them. He gave greater emphasis to personal morality and although he did talk about the National Citizens Service, the list of measures he proposed to tackle the problem focussed more on traditional concerns such as policing, support for families, teaching, welfare reform and the Human Rights Act than on his Big Society programme. Also, it remains to be seen whether the riots will be a one-off or, as in the early 1980s, be repeated by further unrest.

So, at the time of publication of this report, the fate and future of the Big Society agenda is unclear. The Government may continue to implement its programme but do so quietly, in a low-key manner, without the resources or emphasis that would be appear to be justified for such an important part of its manifesto. In doing so, it risks the agenda fading away. Or the agenda could be reinforced with another of the often stated Coalition Government’s objectives which is to be the ‘greenest government ever’. It is this prospect – replete with potential – which is addressed in the rest of this report.
THE BIG SOCIETY & THE ENVIRONMENT

The Big Society agenda, as originally conceived by David Cameron and as it has subsequently developed, has not embraced an explicitly environmental or sustainability flavour although some have claimed that it should. It is clearly starting to inform Government policy on the environment and sustainability. For example, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) says that it wants “to give individuals, businesses, civil society organisations and local authorities a much bigger role in protecting and enhancing the natural environment and a much bigger say about our priorities for it”. But there is little evidence to suggest that the measures being developed by the Cabinet Office are being developed with the environment in mind and there are very few, if any, mentions of the environment on the Cabinet Office’s Big Society web pages.

In one sense, this is surprising. For the environment and sustainable development are areas where the Big Society might be said not only to already exist but to be particularly strong. The membership of national environmental organisations has grown immensely over the last forty years and the membership of some, such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the National Trust is larger than that of the major political parties. Non-governmental environmental organisations include a very large number of different groups of varying sizes and outlooks. Some have significant assets and large staff complements with skills as good if not better in their specialist areas than those in government or the private sector. Some have decades of practical experience in mobilising tens of thousands of volunteers to help to implement large and complex projects. Many are locally led, with close links to their parent communities, and provide excellent learning grounds for community activists and future leaders. Many, though by no means all, are funded largely by charitable giving and sales and are essentially independent of the national and local state. As such, the big green society that they compose seems to provide an excellent model of the Big Society that Mr Cameron believes to be central to his vision.
THE RESEARCH

It seemed worthwhile, therefore, for us to investigate whether the Prime Minister’s Big Society agenda offered any opportunities or indeed posed any potential threats to the environmental agenda, at least as seen through the eyes of leaders of the major environmental NGOs. In particular, we were concerned to see whether the environmental non-governmental organisations saw an opportunity to take part in the Government’s Big Society agenda and thereby to improve Britain’s environmental performance whilst building momentum for the Big Society. We were aware that the environmental groups themselves were debating the issue.

Following a short literature review, and four scoping interviews to ensure we had identified the issue’s major facets and to exclude peripheral aspects of the debate, we conducted semi-structured interviews between June and August 2011 with seventeen opinion formers and practitioners in the environmental NGO sector. The interviewees were drawn from a broad spectrum of environmental NGOs, plus two quasi independent government agencies.

The sections below outline the questions and provide a summary of responses in four parts. Firstly, we consider the questions that asked about the Big Society agenda as a whole. Then we look at attitudes to its component parts; the transfer of powers to local councils and beyond, the transfer of functions from Government departments or agencies to charities and other not-for-profit bodies and the measures to encourage charitable giving and volunteering. Finally we consider the broader issues raised by the respondents and the differences in responses made by the government agencies.

THE BIG SOCIETY – OPPORTUNITY OR THREAT?

The bulk of the interview explored how the interviewees viewed the Big Society agenda as a whole. The following questions were asked:

- What opportunities does the Big Society offer organisations such as yourselves?
- What threats does it pose?
- How important is the Big Society agenda to your organisation, and why?
- Are there other issues that you consider to be more important than the Big Society? If so, what are they, and why?
- From an environmental point of view, how to you think we should judge the success or failure of the Big Society?
- Are there broader implications of the Government’s Big Society agenda that you think we’ve missed? If so, what are they?

The answers we got were both encouraging and frustrating.

On the one hand, many of the NGO leaders were firmly committed to the goal of empowering citizens and communities to achieve change and especially to the encouragement of volunteering. Many saw this goal of empowering citizens and communities as an end in itself, and not simply as a means of securing environmental change. Some saw it as fundamental to the achievement of sustainable development.

Some also saw it as an opportunity – as a means of creating a debate on the role of civic society in delivering policy, as a “door opener” that enabled them to persuade civil servants to consider charities’ views on solving particular problems, or simply as a means of showing the value of the work the charity was already doing.
On the other hand, many were sceptical that the Government’s programme would deliver its objectives or fearful that it would have adverse environmental impacts. Some were openly cynical of the Government’s real aims. Several argued that the Big Society agenda was vague, possibly because they themselves were ignorant of the Government’s programme. The fact that different interviewees had different conceptions of what the Big Society actually means is evidence that some may be confused about it.

Those that suspected ideological motives behind the Government’s plans feared that the Big Society agenda could be a smokescreen for Government cut-backs or that it was designed to pave the way for the eventual privatisation of public services (on the grounds that the private sector would be better placed to win Government contracts than charities themselves). Some astute respondents could point to particular comments made by Ministers that made them wary. For example, one highlighted remarks by Cabinet Office Minister, Francis Maude that he expected the transition to the Big Society to be “chaotic and disorderly” and that “no one can ordain what happens in a capitalist economy. The same should happen in the Big Society. … If I had a plan, it would be the wrong plan” as evidence that the Government’s ideological conception of the Big Society was little different to a market place.

Many pointed to a perceived lack of resourcing (in terms of money, expertise and time) for the Big Society programme as both a reason for believing it would fail and as an indication that the Government was not really serious about it. Others drew attention to cuts in existing programmes, such as to ‘v’ – the national youth volunteering charity and the Sustainable Schools Initiative, which they thought seemed consistent with Big Society agenda and the sort of thing the Government should support. Even those that were close to the Government thought it particularly unfortunate that the Government was trying to implement its Big Society agenda at the very time that it was making significant cuts in public spending. Others questioned whether the Big Society had now become a “toxic brand”.

A number of interviewees feared that the Big Society agenda had limited support within the Conservative Party and might therefore be vulnerable if David Cameron was no longer Prime Minister.

Interviewees were divided in how they saw the importance of the Big Society agenda to their organisations. Some were clearly potential enthusiasts – seeing community empowerment and the encouragement of volunteering an important, if not vital, goals in themselves. Others, who were suspicious of the Government’s agenda, considered it important as a threat to the achievement of their objectives. Yet more, including the Government agencies, considered it important in its own right but also because it was important to the Government. Only a few considered it unimportant.

However, charity leaders said they have many issues to concern them, not least, in the current economic climate, financial survival. In particular, and very importantly, it is clear that the Big Society is subsidiary to sustainable development as a goal in the eyes of most environmental leaders. This view is unsurprising but worth highlighting not just because of the forcefulness with which it was often expressed. Many environmental leaders see themselves as engaged in an historic struggle to change the direction of human development and thereby save society from an environmental and social calamity. For some time, when in Opposition, David Cameron seemed to share that view. Yet in power, he has shown little inclination to pursue the environmental agenda, despite claiming that his Government would be the “greenest government ever”. Many environmental leaders are very disappointed in his performance and that colours their attitudes to the Big Society.
THE BIG SOCIETY IN DETAIL

A second series of questions asked about different aspects of the Big Society programme. The questions asked were:

- Which aspect of the Big Society, if any, do you consider is most important to you and why?
- The Government has said it wishes to devolve power to local councils and beyond, through the Localism Bill. What opportunities exist for not-for-profit organisations from this transfer of functions? What threats exist?
- The Government says it wants to encourage charities and other not-for-profit organisations to take on functions that are currently undertaken by the State and by state agencies. This has potential implications for nature conservation and for programmes to encourage sustainable behaviour and sustainable investment. What opportunities exist from not-for-profit organisations taking over some or all of these functions? What threats exist?
- The Government has said it wishes to encourage more volunteering and charitable giving, such as by training 5000 community organisers, setting up a National Citizens Service and cutting red tape that restricts charities. What opportunities exist for not-for-profit organisations in its plans? What threats exist?

Some interviewees were also asked on what conditions they might wish to take on functions such as the management of Government nature reserves or the delivery of the Green Deal.

Answers to the first question, on which aspect of the Big Society was most important, varied substantially. Several respondents focussed on the opportunities – on the principle of giving people greater control. Others focussed on the threats. Some saw the agenda as an abdication of responsibility by national government for environmental issues; as the encouragement of voluntarism instead of government action. Others pointed to decisions by the Government, such as the abolition of regional development agencies, which seemed to be part of the agenda and which had particularly adversely affected their operations. Some argued that the agenda was so vague that it was impossible to determine which bit of it was most important.

Localism

Of the three major strands of the Big Society agenda, the transfer of powers to local councils and beyond, through the Localism Bill, has probably received most attention from environmental NGOs. Many interviewees reported that their organisations were working actively to influence the Bill which was passing through Parliament at the time the interviews took place. Some recognised that there were potential opportunities associated with the Localism Bill – especially to achieve change for the better by influencing the decisions of local councils. Some also believed that the Government would save money by delegating powers. But, the NGO leaders also pointed to several threats that concerned them.

A number noted the abdication of responsibility by national government that is apparent in the delegation of authority and asked how the UK would meet its carbon targets or biodiversity targets if the national government delegated so much power.

Many feared that localism would lead to parochialism, as decision-makers failed to consider issues beyond their jurisdiction. In some cases, not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) sentiments might mean that local decision-makers protected the local environment. In others, the very same sentiments might lead to the rejection of wind farms and other measures that are needed to combat climate change. Some interviewees feared that environmental performance would be patchy, depending on how strong environmental lobbies were in different places. People in wealthier areas might press for higher environmental standards than communities in poorer areas.
A number thought there would be a cost for their organisations, if powers were delegated, as they would have to lobby many different decision-makers when previously they had been able to focus their resources on Whitehall and Westminster. A few argued that this would benefit NGOs, such as the Wildlife Trusts, which already have a strong regional structure. Others noted that a mismatch might develop whereby NGOs were strong in places where population density was high but weak where it was low, regardless of where the environmental need was greatest. A number feared that their local lobbying efforts would be overwhelmed by better-resourced business lobbies and that environmental protection would worsen as a whole as a result of the change. One speculated that local businesses might use the Bill’s powers to create a local development plan of their own – or that different sections of the community might put forward competing plans.

**Taking on state functions**

The environmental leaders were generally sceptical about the Government’s desire that NGOs take on functions that are currently undertaken by the Government or by Government agencies. A number expressed a genuine disbelief that NGOs were necessarily more efficient in their delivery than government or the private sector and wanted to see evidence to justify the Government’s stance. Many wished to act in partnership with an active State rather than take over functions from a State in retreat.

The views of many had been coloured by the debate over plans to privatise the Forestry Commission which had been abandoned following significant protest. Some prominent environmentalists had fiercely criticized environmental NGOs during the debate and these tensions were apparent in the interviews. Although no interviewees expressed a desire to take on forests that were currently Government-owned, some did want to see more local community ownership of woodlands. But others questioned the accountability of non-governmental organisations and asked whether they were necessarily any better at engaging with local communities than government agencies. Some argued that the Government, nationally or locally, was better placed to own and manage these assets.

Opinions were equally divided over whether to take on other Government functions. Some, especially those with experience in engaging the public in behaviour change, could see opportunities to run services on behalf of the Government departments or local authorities. Others believed their mission lay elsewhere – in influencing Government, in working with business or in delivering services overseas. Several feared that if NGOs were to take over functions on behalf of the Government their independence would be compromised. Others feared that competition between NGOs would increase, weakening their ability to work together, for example, to change Government policy. Some warned that NGOs who “chased the money” could get distracted from their charitable objects and mission, alienating their existing supporters.

All interviewees, including those who said they were interested in carrying out functions on behalf of government, could see practical difficulties in doing so. First and foremost was the issue of money. How could the Government expect them to take on functions that it wasn’t prepared to pay for itself? Secondly, it was argued that when the Government was prepared to pay, it often issued calls to tender in ways that NGOs could not meet. Thirdly, some expressed a fear that they might be expected to take on public sector pensions or other liabilities as part of the contracting out.

Several argued that the Government’s interest in encouraging charities to tender for services was merely a ruse to hide further contracting out of services to private companies, which were more likely to win contracts because they had greater access to capital, more flexibility in restructuring their operations and fewer debilitating principles.

The environmental leaders were generally sceptical about the Government’s desire that NGOs take on functions that are currently undertaken by the Government or by Government agencies.
When we asked on what conditions they might be interested in taking on functions from the Government or Government agencies such as the managing woodlands or running programmes to change behaviour, several stressed that they were already doing so. Several had also had previous experience in doing so but had seen these programmes cut. None was optimistic that there was a great opportunity at present. Those that were interested in taking on work wanted to do so in partnership with the Government, in innovative ways whereby they felt they could make a particular contribution that the Government or private sector couldn’t or in partnership with local community groups, which they could support with their specialist knowledge. Many said they had no desire to take on functions from Government.

Encouraging charitable giving and volunteering
Of all the issues, we asked about, interviewees had least knowledge of the Government’s plans to encourage more charitable giving, cut red tape, train community organisers and promote volunteering. However, the answers we were given were clear. Environmental leaders generally welcomed plans to encourage giving but were not convinced they would make much difference. Several mentioned changes, such as an opt-out instead of an opt-in for gift-aid or the introduction of ‘living legacies’, which they would like to see and which they believed would have more impact. Very few believed that cutting red tape would make it significantly easier for them to achieve their objectives.

Interviewees were more enthusiastic, some markedly so, about the principle of training community organisers and encouraging more volunteering, including encouraging volunteers to take on management tasks. Some hoped that the Government’s plans would encourage a more diverse range of volunteers to come forward. However, several expressed doubts that the Government’s plans would work. In particular, several NGOs stressed that they would incur costs if they took on more volunteers and that the Government should be prepared to meet these costs, as did some private sector funders.

A few opposed the very idea of Government-run or funded volunteering schemes, perhaps fearing that such schemes would divert volunteers toward “practical projects” and away from more political action. Likewise, several questioned the independence of community organisers who had been trained through government programmes.

BROADER ISSUES
Finally, interviewees were asked:

• Are there broader implications of the Government’s Big Society agenda that you think we’ve missed? If so, what are they?

Unsurprisingly, the respondents gave a very wide range of answers to this question. However it did bring out some broader points that are worth recording, especially as some were also made by other interviewees in response to other questions.

First, a number suggested that there is a contradiction between what the Government seems to want to achieve through its Big Society agenda and what it seems to want to achieve through the other agendas that it is pursuing. The conflict between the Big Society and the Government’s austerity agenda has already been noted in the context of cut-backs to existing Big Society-like programmes. But interviewees also mentioned that the Government’s deregulatory agenda seems to be in conflict with the Big Society and perhaps has even polluted parts of the Big Society agenda, such as the Localism Bill.

Second, several suggested that the Big Society agenda, especially if it entails a transfer of functions, changes the relationship between government and the charity sector and between charities and the public. They felt that charities who took on functions on behalf of government might lose their independence and that this would erode public trust in them. One argued strongly that charities have
a vital role to play as “trust brokers” between government and communities and that the way the Big Society agenda was being played out could prevent them from exercising this role in the future.

Third, a number argued that the achievement of the Big Society depended in part on a stable economy. This echoed the views of many that the achievement of the Big Society agenda has been badly, perhaps fatally, compromised by its being implemented during a period of government cut backs.

Finally, one respondent questioned whether, if big government is the enemy of the Big Society, big business is an obstacle too.

**Views of the agencies**

The responses given by the two interviewees from Government agencies were similar in many ways to those of the environmental charities. There was the same feeling that the Big Society agenda is vague and not very new, but worthwhile; the same enthusiasm for engaging people; the same view that the Big Society is important but so is achieving environmental targets; the same fears that localism might make it harder for national organisations to influence decisions and so on and so on.

What differences there were probably only differences of perspective – on the implications of the Big Society agenda as seen by an agency that is responsible, in part, for implementing it as opposed to an outside organisation that can take part or not as it likes. For example, the agencies seemed more worried than the NGOs that the Big Society agenda might lead to environmental services being delivered patchily; feared that NGOs taking on services might not be perceived as balanced and were concerned about what happens should the contracting out of a service go wrong. However, they were genuinely committed to building and maintaining strong partnerships with NGOs in their sphere, including exploring whether the NGOs could undertake services on their behalf and they were genuinely committed to engaging more people in their work.
THE BIG GREEN SOCIETY: AN OPPORTUNITY IN WAITING?

At the start of this paper, we asked two simple questions: what can the Big Society do for the environment? And what can the environmental NGOs do for the Big Society? The answer, at least as far as our interviewees were concerned, is that the Big Society could do a lot for the environment, if the Government wanted it to and found the resources. Conversely, the environmental movement could do a lot for the Big Society. Environmental issues have a proven record of motivating millions of people to act for the good of their communities and wider society. Environmental organisations already provide a wealth of opportunities to demonstrate the Big Society in action.

Of course, our survey was only a snapshot. We interviewed just fifteen leaders in NGOs and two in government agencies and were unable able to interview leaders in every organisation we wanted to. All interviewees headed or were very senior in their organisations. Their opinions may differ from those of the more junior staff working for them. All the NGO leaders were from relatively large organisations, by environmental NGO standards. Their opinions may differ from those of their colleagues working for small, local community-based groups.

But there was enough commonality in the responses to suggest that an opportunity exists to give the Big Society agenda an environmental dimension as well as a social one, should the Government desire such an outcome.

To succeed in doing so, however, the Government needs to clarify its thinking both on the Big Society and on the environment.
First and foremost, the Government needs to reassure environmental NGOs of its views on the role of government, internationally, nationally and locally, in protecting the “public good” that is a quality natural environment. There is an overwhelming scientific and economic case for government action to protect and enhance the natural environment and the present Government needs to reaffirm its acceptance of it.

Secondly, the Government needs to take on board environmental concerns about Localism: recognizing the potential for local communities to “free-ride” by failing to play their part in protecting environmental assets, that have benefits for society more generally; and taking steps to ensure that decisions taken locally respect the wider good.

Third, the Government needs to be clearer on the circumstances under which not-for-profit organisations are better placed than government or the private sector to undertake functions that have previously been undertaken by the government or its agencies. It needs to explain how a transfer of function is better than a partnership whereby government departments, agencies, NGOs, private companies and individuals all work together.

Fourth, the Government needs to provide adequate resources if it wants to encourage much higher levels of community participation, activism and volunteering. It cannot expect the voluntary sector to deliver this for free and evidence suggests that it will not achieve it by cutting red tape or enabling more charitable giving.

Regardless of any decision the Government takes on its Big Society agenda, the research we undertook, also prompted questions that we believe the environmental NGOs need to consider. Above all, if the Government is not interested in adding an explicit environmental dimension to its Big Society agenda and if it continues to implement its austerity and deregulatory agendas in ways that weaken environmental protection, what can the environmental NGOs do to strengthen the big green society that already exists and to persuade it to change its mind?

In our view there is an urgent need for Government and civil society to come together and re-establish the conditions for synthesizing the best in the Big Society and ‘greenest government ever’ agendas; that this might formerly have been undertaken by an agency such as the Commission for Sustainable Development, which was closed on 31st March 2011. However, in the spirit of cross-party consensus and higher ideals, this synthesis should now be facilitated by a task force of committed representatives of government, opposition, academia and civil society operating in an inclusive and transparent manner in service of what could be a significant opportunity to simultaneously enhance social inclusion, hope, quality of life and environmental protection.

‘PLAN B’ AND A GREEN NEW DEAL: POTENTIAL SYNERGIES WITH NGOS

As noted above, several of our interviewees suggested that the feasibility, and indeed successful implementation, of the Big Society idea needs to be driven by higher levels of resourcing. Potential increases in resource streams, interviewees suggested, would lead to better the chances of achieving the Big Society that Mr Cameron craves.

Meanwhile, critics of the Government have also been urging a change in economic policy. A group of 100 economists and academics have criticised the Government’s ‘Plan A’ – the rapid cuts that it has implemented and its emphasis on moving away from a borrowing culture. Instead, they advocate a ‘Plan B’ which would involve ending cuts in the public sector and scrapping Private Finance Initiatives (PFIs) to achieve, the authors argue, a saving of £200bn in debt repayment.

Most significantly for this report, Plan B argues that the Government could use centrally driven Quantitative Easing (QE) to create a Green New Deal, which it is suggested would create and retain jobs, as well as offer a route towards more carbon friendly businesses. This notion of a Green New Deal would potentially benefit communities and localism, as well as linking with existing NGO initiatives and goals.

It could also potentially provide some resourcing to energise the areas of the Big Society which the environmental NGOs interviewed felt would fit with existing agendas across the sector and benefit local communities. One route to policy success on this issue could be cross-party consensus around the creation of a Green New Deal linked more explicitly to the Big Society initiative, in tandem with the environmental NGO sector, but further research into this would be needed.
CONCLUSION

The Prime Minister, David Cameron’s Big Society agenda was central to his vision, to the 2010 Conservative manifesto and to his compact with the Liberal Democrats. In its implementation, the Government can point to achievements but should also recognise failures. It has been widely derided and had failed to inspire key actors in the NGO sector.

The environmental NGOs and the people who volunteer with them could be considered to be a model big green society of the type that Mr Cameron appears to want. Our interviews with environmental NGO leaders suggest that, although they are sceptical of much of the implementation of the Big Society agenda, they are supportive or potentially supportive of the principle.

We believe there is an urgent need for Government and civil society to come together and re-establish the conditions for synthesizing the best in the Big Society and ‘greenest government ever’ agendas. We propose that this synthesis could be facilitated by a task force of committed representatives of government, opposition, academia and civil society.

To facilitate this, however, the Government needs to reassure environmental NGOs of its views on its role in protecting and enhancing the public good that is a quality natural environment. It needs to take on board environmental concerns about Localism and take steps to prevent environmental ‘free-riding’. It needs to be clearer about when it thinks it makes sense for services to be transferred from government to the private sector and charities and how this transfer is better than a partnership between different actors.

Above all, it needs to provide adequate resources if it wants to encourage much higher levels of community participation, activism and volunteering.
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References
References available from the author on request.
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