

The BIG SOCIETY Handbook 2011/12

From July 2011 Methodist Conference to where we are in our local churches – what does the ‘Big Society’ agenda mean in practice for our local churches and communities?

This handbook is a brief guide to assist reflections and potential developments relating to the Big Society & Methodism in our local areas

***prepared in partnership with Commitment
in Communities (C-i-C)***



The BIG SOCIETY HANDBOOK

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What is the Big Society and How Could Churches Respond? - a summary of the 2011 report to Methodist Conference

(references from original text shown in brackets)

What is Big Society? (section 2.0)

(2.4)

The Government has identified three main strands of what will make up the Big Society:

- **social action**
- **public service reform**
- **community empowerment**

(2.5)

There will be five main components which dovetail with the Government's 'localism' agenda:

1. **Give communities more powers**
2. **Encourage people to take an active role in their communities**
3. **Transfer power from central to local government**
4. **Support co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises**
5. **Publish governance data**

(2.7) the Big Society is 'bottom up not top down' (ref D Cameron), and so how the Big Society works in your local area will depend very much on local variables and local leadership

The Church and the Big Society (section 4.0)

(4.5) The *Priorities for the Methodist Church* commit us to working 'in partnership with others wherever possible.' This is part of what it means to be Methodists – we are a movement which engages, not one which withdraws.

..... So our response to the invitation of the Big Society needs to take into account the fact that we are a movement of engagement.

How have Churches responded to the Big Society? (5.0)

(5.3) A paper to the General Synod in November 2010 argued that churches could use the political narrative of Big Society to shift relationship between state, individuals and intermediary institutions in a way which 'reflect a Christian understanding of society and reinforce the church's place in a healthy social order.'



Opportunities to be Actors in the Big Society (6.0)

(6.1) What practical opportunities does the Big Society offer to churches?

- Many churches will continue doing what they have been doing in terms of engaging with and serving their communities
 - The Big Society may invite churches to find new opportunities to serve communities
 - There may be some opportunities for churches – as the government's plan is to hand over some service provision from statutory authorities to mutuals, social enterprises and charities – some churches see this as representing a great opportunity to both bid for funding and to increase their role in society.
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Challenges from the Big Society for our Church (7.0)

(7.1)

- How does the Methodist Church engage with and serve the communities in which we are based?
- Do we recognize any challenges to our own priorities, policies and practices?

(7.2a)

- Do we encourage Circuits and churches to consider that community engagement is part of what it means to be a healthy Circuit?
 - Do our funding criteria allow us to fund the possibly less attractive work which struggles to find continuation funding?
 - Church buildings are often described as crucial to an area's social capital – buildings that are at the disposal of the community, offering meeting places, stability and identity. Do we use our buildings in this way?
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(7.4)

How can we take the opportunity asked by the questions the Big Society concept is asking

..... to examine whether the Methodist Church is living out its commitment to being a connexional Church, a movement of active disciples, living out our faith in an unfair world?



Social Capital – a Brief Overview

One way of analysing the practical examples of our work within our local communities is by overlaying the concept of building and measuring *Social Capital*.

Social Capital is a phrase that has permeated the language of regeneration and social policy for a number of years. Social capital has been described as the ‘social glue’ between people; it refers to the social networks, shared norms and co-operative relationships that help us to get along together as a society. It is about civic engagement, participation in local communities, trust and reciprocity, feelings of well-being and empowerment.

Social capital was first described by an American social reformer in 1916, but it is only since the late 1990s that there has been a substantial interest in the concept and a big increase in the amount of research on the subject.

The work of Robert Putman has made the most impact on the debate on social capital. In 1993 he published ‘Making Democracy Work’ which looked at the effectiveness of regional government in Italy and came to the conclusion that budgets and policy frameworks did not make a significant difference, instead the critical factor was the vibrancy of associational life and the level of trust between strangers inside their regions. He followed this up with the now internationally recognised work, “Bowling Alone”, which explores the concept in much greater detail.

Robert Putman describes social capital as:

“ Features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives ... Social capital, in short, refers to social connections and the attendant norms and trust.”

Social capital can be broken down into bonding, bridging, and linking social capital:

<i>Type of social capital</i>	<i>Type of relationship</i>	<i>Contributes to</i>
Bonding strong relationships and networks between people from similar backgrounds	Horizontal – this level would equate to the congregation of a church or a team on a specific project	Social support, emotional well-being, pastoral care
Bridging relationships and networks across social groups (e.g that cross age, sex, ethnicity etc)	Horizontal – this level would equate to Circuit or District working	Social cohesion, civic identity, supporting individual church and District activities
Linking connections and networks between communities, and agencies or institutions with resources.	Vertical – this level would equate to all levels of church engaging with partners (ecumenical, local communities, statutory agencies)	Democratic Life, responsive public services, legitimacy of public institutions, interfaith networking, working closely with social services etc.

Within the context of ‘Big Society’, social capital can help shape our strategies on what ‘being church in local community means’ and how we translate strategies into practical outworking of our mission that encompasses bonding, bridging and linking as effectively as possible



What is happening in the District about Big Society?

The Manchester & Stockport District spans three major Statutory Areas – Greater Manchester, Derbyshire/High Peak and Cheshire East. Below is a summary of what is being done in each of these three statutory areas at a strategic level .

[Note that in all three statutory areas other Districts are also engaged and many local churches and circuits are already actively engaging their local councils]

Greater Manchester & ‘AGMA’

There are 10 local authorities/boroughs within the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA): Bolton, Bury, Rochdale, Salford, Wigan, Manchester, Tameside, Trafford, Stockport, Oldham. Greater Manchester has been identified as one of the top 10 areas in the UK the government are focussing on for developing Community Budgets and assisting in embedding the Localism bill.

Local links in Methodist Churches from the ten AGMA boroughs have attended two workshops, facilitated by CiC, where we have explored what the Big Society potentially means for Methodism in Greater Manchester and how we might best ‘ready ourselves’ to engage at the levels required to access resources, support and advice that enables us to be most effective at local level. These workshops are ran jointly with Bolton & Rochdale District as four of the GM boroughs are in the B&R area.

Future engagements could include (a) CiC supporting local churches within a particular borough (b) further ‘AGMA-wide’ workshops - with a wider group of participants (c) ecumenical and inter-faith dialogue

Local Authority Area	No. of Methodist Churches (incl LEPs)
Bolton	22
Bury	16
Manchester	24 (23)
Oldham	23 (23)
Rochdale	18 (1)
Salford	16 (10)
Stockport	23 (23)
Tameside	16 (16)
Trafford	15 (15)
Wigan	26
TOTAL:	199 (111)

(numbers in brackets indicates churches within the M&S District)



Cheshire East

Earlier this year, there was an audit of 155 faith organisations in Cheshire East, led by the 'Hidden Treasure' project. Within those groups were Methodist Churches as well as many others. The report evidenced the vast amount of time already given to engaging and support communities by faith organisations and in particular by churches (150 of the 154 groups included were churches, 46 were Methodist churches – spread across Manchester & Stockport and Chester & Stoke Districts).

The report – entitled 'Hidden Treasure' - was prepared by the 'GoProject' team and is being developed to be accessible by local faith groups in Cheshire East as a tool to continue reflection on the value and worth of faith groups within their local communities. Cheshire East Council were very supportive of the report.

Number of Methodist Churches in the Cheshire East Council Area **75 (24)**

(numbers in brackets indicates churches within the M&S District)

Derbyshire & High Peak

There have been discussions since 2010 that have continued in parallel with the government plans for 'Big Society' . These discussions were to look at ways we might best serve our rural communities in the areas in and around the Peak Park. The area covers some parts of Glossop, High Peak, Whaley Bridge and Buxton Circuits – plus several other Circuits from three Districts who stretch into the Peak area (Sheffield, Chester & Stoke, Notts & Derby).

Discussions have included consideration of appointing a Rural Development Enabler – dedicated resource to enable local churches in the Peak Park engage the needs of their communities in this changing society that, for many, does not feel so 'big'.

Whilst the Peak Park is not an area of high deprivation statistically, it does have high levels of hidden poverty and challenges where the church can and is able to engage – in ways akin to the community organiser/partner model of the Big Society remit. [It could be said this would be achieved without any governance legislation – however this partnership way of working is further evidence of churches having a crucial role to play in ensuring the Big Society agenda is 'rural-proofed' to protect those more remote communities from being excluded or overlooked]

Local Authority Area	No. of Methodist Churches (incl LEPs)
Derbyshire County Council	9 (3)
High Peak CC	19 (14)
TOTAL:	28 (17)

(numbers in brackets indicates churches within the M&S District)



The Localism Bill – a Look Inside

Introduction:

The Guide produced by the Government on the Localism Bill is available online:
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1793908.pdf>

The Guide contains one-page summaries of the **Six Actions** through which the Government intends to deliver Localism, along with summaries of the associated measures that will be introduced alongside it. So here are the main headings with some of the measures and wider reforms.

Action 1: Lift the burden of bureaucracy

- Abolition of Regional Strategies and targets
- Abolition of the Standards Board controlling local councillors
- Ending of pre-determination rules preventing councillors acting on local issues
- Abolition of Comprehensive Area Assessments monitoring local authority performance

Action 2: Empower Communities to do things their way

- General Power of Competence allowing local authorities to do anything not prohibited by law
- Community right to buy - saving local assets threatened by closure
- Neighbourhood Plans - giving local people the ability to plan development
- Support from Government in helping the community to exercise new powers

Action 3: Increase Local Control of Public Finance

- Council Tax referendums giving people the power of veto over excessive increases
- Business Rate discounts decided by local authorities
- Community Infrastructure Levy retained with a proportion returned to neighbourhoods affected by development

Action 4: Diversify the supply of public services

- Community right to challenge and run local services
- Community right to buy (again - see 2 above) this time by taking over delivery of local services
- New rights for staff to take over and run public services through mutual societies

Action 5: Open Up Government to Public Scrutiny

- Local authorities to publish remuneration of chief officers
- COINS database on historical spending by Government departments
- Local authorities to publish every item of expenditure over £500
- More transparency from public bodies on contracts, salaries and staffing

Action 6: Strengthen accountability to local people

- Local referendums, via petition, on issues of local concern
- Elected mayors for 12 cities subject to referendums
- Elected police and crime commissioners



Getting Behind the Spin: Buzz Words Explained

BIG SOCIETY BANK Funds from dormant bank accounts will be used to establish a Big Society Bank, which will provide new finance (mostly loans) for neighbourhood groups, charities, social enterprises and other non-governmental bodies.

LOCALISM BILL The Bill seeks to devolve powers to communities. It has implications for the way in which local government engages with its communities, and introduces new statutory duties. (see previous page)

COMMUNITY ORGANISERS The programme will recruit and train 500 senior community organisers, along with a further 4,500 part-time voluntary organisers, over four years. The work of the community organisers will be to enable people to take action on their own behalf and have the power and confidence to tackle the issues which are important to them. It will also enable them to make the most of new local community rights and opportunities to achieve their own aspirations.

SOCIAL IMPACT (INVESTMENT) BONDS Social Impact Bonds can deliver additional resources to communities by transforming public service funding from crisis intervention to prevention.

How do these 'bonds' work?

Investors in a social impact bond will receive a dual return:

1. they will receive interest on their investment, typically over a period of two or three years
2. they will receive a social return through knowing that their investment has enabled a specific programme of interventions designed to improve a particular problem in society

The basic concept is that the funds raised by a specific social impact bond will be utilised to help fund those organisations (including churches) delivering those interventions in the period prior to receiving an outcome based payment from the commissioner of that programme (normally central or local government).

This transfers any risk onto the investor and allows the Government to shift funding into preventative work which also theoretically decreases spending on social problems later in their life cycle.

Methodism could potentially invest financially in selected 'bonds' as long as core values of the Church are upheld and financial risks are recognised.



Further Resources and Support Available

Statutory Online Resources:

There are many websites and online agencies writing about the Big Society. However the links provided here take you straight to where the policies are being made so we hope you find these useful (and without too much ‘spin’ or jargon!):

<http://www.socialfinance.org.uk/home>

<http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/big-society>

<http://www.agma.gov.uk/>

Resources & Contacts within the District:

Within the District we have Commitment in Communities (CiC) providing us with many online resources available at www.c-i-c.org.uk

Window for Every Church the ‘hub’ for all Methodist churches and related projects in the North West, mapped to their communities and linked to others doing similar work across the region and beyond

Advice & Support guidance notes and supporting documentation for those engaging or reviewing how to do effective work with local communities

Funding advice on latest funding streams available in the region

Policy briefs/updates sub-set of the relevant discussion papers posted for localised updates (e.g. recent AGMA reports)

If you would like further assistance with any of the areas included in this booklet, please contact us:

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